1

The distant horizon is not so distant there. The view is limited to three quarters of a mile on either side. And within the confines of human sight, there is a beautiful rounded hill.

Hills stand one piled on the other creating an illusion of innumerable *vimans*. The peaks of the hills, small and large, incline towards a valley at their centre. The valley is covered by the green forest. The river, Muran, flows through this beautiful valley, from one end of the highland to the other.

The canopy of the night stretched overhead. Darkness and stars filled every fold of the grey hills. The round hill of the village, Lulla, couldn't contain them. The sky of the lonely night spread beyond them.

In that darkness four villagers from Lulla came down the hillside. Dense forest stood on both sides. This was the kingdom of the tiger. Four of them—Ram Muduli, the village headman, Chancheri Domb, the barber, Hari Jani, an elderly man and Eleo Sunna, the old man from the Christian settlement—groped their way with sticks and torches.

They descended to the valley from the hilltop. Something suddenly caught their eyes. The belt of blazing fire around one hill created an illusion of Diwali illumination. What a beautiful sight! On the other hill a tongue of fire played like a flash of lightning. At some places the fire encircled the hill like a girdle; at others it moved along a straight line. The hill mingled with the darkness. The sky and the hill had become one. These magical shapes—flowers of fire, creepers of fire, jewels of fire spreading over each corner, from heaven to hell, from north to south—seemed to be suspended from a body of darkness. Light emerging out of darkness. The men of the forest watched this festival of fire as if it was taking place in a dark void.

It was the last part of the month of Phaguna. In the hills *phiri* grass had dried. The thick bushes were also parched. The men looked at the fire, stunned. Although it was a regular sight for them, whenever they saw it, they paused awhile to watch the

magic spectacle. Walking among the dried *phiri* grass, Chancheri blew into the fire, which once again leaped high. Ram Muduli on one side and Hari Jani on the other tried playing with the fire in wanton pleasure. All on a sudden the fire spread. Having had their bit of fun they now made their way to their village at the foot of the hill.

As they approached the village, a smile shone on their faces. Smiles grow livelier in the light. Sundry topics were discussed. Thoughts crowd the mind in the dark. One of them suggested: "This wild fire at night like lightning in the darkness—how does it happen? Who causes it? How does it spread and look so beautiful?"

Eleo was an old man. Many days had passed since he had converted to the Christian faith. His parents, in fond affection, had named him Kumuti in the hope that their child would one day become a *kumuti,* a rich man accumulating wealth and amassing property. Eleo explained : "See, the wild fire has spread because we lit it. Has it started on its own? You Paraja people would say that it's the work of ghosts or *dumas.* That's all rubbish."

Chancheri Domb joined him: "It's all a lie—*duma* and all."

Hari Jani said: "All right, we've lit the fire here but what about the fire which has spread for miles, almost halfway into the sky? Who went to those corners of the forest to light the fire? *Dumas* have done this. It is they who have lighted this fire over there."

Chancheri, nodding assent, said: "True, it's *dumas* who light the fire. Who says they don't exist ?"

Eleo said: " People go there during the daytime. They light the fire over there, and it gradually spreads and continues through the night as well. People travel along that way just as we travel along this."

Ram, the headman, protested: "Have you ever seen them going there ?"

Eleo said: "Have you ever seen *dumas* doing it ?"

Hari Jani softened his stand: "Nobody has seen who has done it—neither you nor I. You say it's the men who do it, we say it's *dumas.* How can you say you're right and we're not? Be that as it may. You're right in your own belief and we in our own."

Chancheri said: "I agree."

Ram said: "If it's not *dumas*, who is it then ? It's only they who make the night, the stars, mountains, valleys and all. They alone cause the fire and the rain. This is not what only we believe today; it has been the belief of our forefathers. These mysteries are beyond you Dombs. Bring your sahib here and show him the fire and ask him what it is. How can *dumas* not exist ? So many people die. What do they become ?"

"Our faith recognises no such thing," said Eleo.

Ram said: "Is your religion older than me? I am as old as this hill. I died and my grandfather was born. My grandfather's brother died—I am his *duma*. I'll die—my *duma* will have a rebirth. As long as I remain a *duma* and am not reborn, my *duma* will wander about in the hill and valley and will light the forest fire; it will blow as wind, make *girli* flowers fall, form clouds, make the seeds sprout on the hillside and make the stars blossom in the darkness. I know, you know nothing."

Eleo said: "You always speak like this. You'll never read the scriptures. The pastor has read out many books to us. Would you like to know what they say ?"

Ram interrupted him: "Yes, I know, once the pastor brought a book. A new one, white like a piece of new cloth. But you have not seen our *pothi*, the palm leaf *pothi* in the house of the *dishari*. So many things are written there—about the weather, about the rain and about the *dumas*. It's quite old—as old as the hill, as old as the darkness. Yours is new."

Eleo: "All right brother ! Your religion is good for you and mine for me, why this quarrel ?"

Chancheri agreed with him.

Thereafter they proceeded along their path in silence for a time. From a distance the light of the village was visible. In the night, children had gathered round the fire in front of their homes—some of them roasting maize, others roasting goatskin. As they approached the village, the dusty smell of its soil and the smell of its smoke held out the hope of a shelter like the soiled *anchal* of an old mother. The four men drew near the village. All of a sudden came the roar of a tiger, echoing from hill to hill, making the heart quake, turning one's blood into water, stripping the trees of their leaves. The four men stood transfixed under a branching *jhari* tree at the edge of the village.

Eleo said : "A big tiger is prowling on the hill."

Hari Jani said : "It's not a tiger, it is the spirit of a person devoured by a tiger. It is a *tiger-duma*."

Ram, the headman, asked : "The tiger kills and eats so many. Who knows whose *duma* it is ?"

Chancheri said : "The tiger or the tiger-*duma* — what does the difference matter to us ? It is really terrifying."

The four friends walked on.

"Who's there ?" someone from the village shouted.

At last they were in their village.

2

The following day Ram, the headman, convened the *panchayat*.

The main village path ran past a sprawling banyan tree. There lay the *veraman*, the meeting place of the villagers. Pointed and flat stones lay all around. A pointed stone slab is planted in memory of each dead man and a flat one for each dead woman. Pieces of stone were scattered all over the place. During the *panchayat* meetings the delegates made themselves comfortable on these stone-seats and at night the villagers sat on them to watch *dhangdi* dances.

The whole village turned out on the *veraman*, men, women and children. Each made a seat for himself, looking grave. Not a single mouth uttered a word. The old *dishari* was seated in the middle. His eyeballs seemed to swim under the influence of country liquor and his lips quivered. A shoulder bag lay by his side. Children, curious to know what was in it, peeped from behind their parents' shoulders. There lay an old, worn-out, oil-stained *pothi*, powder of various colours, a few *bhalia* fruits, a magic bone, a wick, a painted wooden dagger, a sword and a spear.

Ram started: "Speak 0 *dishari*, old man, speak."

The *dishari* said: "The time is auspicious. Let the *gurumai* start."

Shyam *gurumai* rose quietly and turned to the *dishari*. He was a male, but he wore his hair long. Like a woman he had put on a saree, and a ring in his nose. The villagers believed that since he was neither male nor female, he was possessed of divine qualities. No one else was to be possessed by the spirits. So he was called *gurumai*.

Every village had its own *gurumais*. Children offered by parents to the mercy of gods were called *gurumais*. They were the spirit of *gopis*. Whatever they might be at other times, in the course of a *puja* they were nothing but women.

Shyam *gurumai* went and stood near the *dishari*, who decorated the floor and lighted a wick. A young unmarried boy built a fire and cooked some rice. On a big dried leaf-cup the *dishari* served cooked rice scattered some *bhalia* fruits and put a clay lamp on it.

Then, placing the leaf-cup on the *gurumai's* head the *dishari* muttered some *mantras,* his lips quivering. From one corner came the sound of drums. The *dishari* gave a wooden sword and a wooden spear to the *gurumai.* Shyam *gurumai* fell into a trance; he was now possessed by the *kalisi.*

The drumbeats continued for about an hour. And the *gurumai* kept dancing in the hot sun. A number of women, their hair dishevelled, followed him dancing all the way. Near the crossroads cocks and pigeons were sacrificed. The *gurumai* danced raising dust all around. Shyam *gurumai's* dance was an impressive spectacle. It awed even the strong and the brave.

The *gurumai* screamed : "Yesterday I shouted so many times during the early hours of the night. I kept on shouting, but you simply did not care to listen to me. I said thrice—I'll eat, I'll eat, I'll eat."

The young and the old of the village stood in a group on one side. On the other stood the old *dishari* swinging from side to side, drinking country liquor from a pot. As words came from the mouth of the *gurumai,* all of them bent down covering their faces with their hands, like the ragi plants bent by a gust of wind, crying, "Oh and alas !"

The *gurumai* again shouted : "I'll eat, I'll eat, I'll eat".

All the villagers, about a hundred and fifty of them, fell flat on the ground and shouted, "Alas, Alas!"

The *gurumai* said: "I'm Dadi Budha, your creator, yet you all ignore me. In every village they worship their Dadi Budha. But you don't worship yours in your village. You've never offered me a chicken or a goat, a pigeon or even some water. I roam about miserably on an empty stomach. This is my last warning. I shall wait for three more days. After that I'll eat and I'll eat. I'll eat you up."

The villagers heaved a long sigh of relief when they heard of a three-day respite. The dead drums came back to life and all the villagers danced to their beats. A male goat was sacrificed; the throats of chickens and pigeons were slit and their blood splashed the face of Dadi Budha. Their severed bodies lay shuddering on the ground. The blood was sprinkled on the face of Dadi Budha. Prayers were offered up to him.

The *gurumai* ran in one breath up the village path. The married young women followed him dancing. There was a small hillock in the middle of the village. The *gurumai* jumped and leaped to reach it. The villagers followed him, dancing and beating their drums. The *gurumai* embraced the old date-plam tree on the top of the hillock and fainted. The worship came to an end.

Pointing to the date-palm tree, the old *dishari* said: "We've got the answer. From today Dadi Budha will live here. Never forget to offer your prayers."

All the drums became loud once again and everyone began to dance. Young men whistled as they danced. The waists of young women moved in harmony with the drum-beats. The old men and women danced in gay abandon. A hundred and fifty villagers installed Dadi Budha in that date-palm tree.

The *dishari* chanted some *mantras*, turned over the almanac and with his face held up to the sun muttered to himself. Sprinkling coloured powder on the ground and fixing a stick in a corner he stared at its shadow and drank some country liquor from a gourd bowl. All on a sudden he shouted: "Strike, strike; cut the upper portion of the tree, or else Dadi Budha will leave the place."

A few axes soon fell upon the tree. It was cut to a man's height. The trunk of the date-palm tree now became Dadi Budha. The surface of the trunk was scarred from top to bottom with about a score of axe-marks, painted white, red and black. These scars looked like wounds filled with turmeric and quicklime. A piece of white cloth was wrapped around the head of the trunk like a turban. Dadi Budha stared down with his eyes wide open like a cautious guardian keeping a watch on the village.

A ring of hills encircled the deep valley. And through it flowed the rocky, twisted, sickle-shaped Muran river. On the banks of the river there were clusters of tiny hamlets. There was a small hillock and on its bald top stood the bare trunk of the date-palm tree, Dadi Budha.

The tribals of Koraput do not call one's father's brother, *dadi;* by it they mean one's father's father and his father. Likewise for them *shasura* is not one's wife's father, but her brother. The languages of the Parajas and the Kondhs blend when the words *dadi* and *budha* combine. In the Kondh language *budha* means father's father.

Dadi Budha in the disfigured date-palm tree on the hillock stared all around with his twinkling bright eyes. Before his watchful eyes the day passed and the night came; the wonder of darkness filled the caves.

Dadi Budha was a benign deity. He never expressed his anger until he was provoked. He was the eternal ancestor. Everything was his creation, his play. Anyone could speak on his behalf, for he was mute.

From the heights the fields looked beautiful: lines of hedges, squares of plots. The wheat fields looked deep green, ragi fields blue-black, and paddy fields light green. Adjacent to them lay the vegetable gardens fenced with twigs and branches. Inside the fenced plots long beards of ripe maize fluttered in the breeze. All kinds of vegetables grew in abundance. Dadi Budha watched them all; he saw his children and grandchildren gathering in the harvest from the rocky fields. Then Dadi Budha took a short nap. The crows plucked the ears of maize one by one. The cattle strayed into the fields. All this was his play.

At noon the village girls throwing off their clothes entered the Muran river and frolicked in the water. The cowherd, leaving his cows to graze, sat down under the banyan tree and played his flute. At nightfall herds of cows and buffaloes issued from the bowels of the hill were returning towards the low-lying village. Flocks of birds mingled with the leaves of the trees. The day ended; from the low-roofed huts smoke spiralled up. From inside the *dhangda-hall* came the sound of the drums. In the dark of the night young men and women played, singing songs. Dadi Budha stood still on the hillock.

Every Friday, holding umbrellas and bags, streams of people would flow past Dadi Budha to the market at Naligaan. There the onlookers outnumbered the buyers and sellers. For them the market was a fair. On the pretext of buying a paisa-worth of tobacco leaves or a pinch of salt they would walk eight to ten *kosas* to the market place. Half of the men and almost all women of the village were there. Plaiting buns using castor oil, tucking into them bunches of white flowers, and wearing red sarees went the nimble-footed young women of the hills. Their legs never ached; they walked along, laughing and singing. To the market walked both the

Paraja girls and the Domb girls. The Christian girls in blouses and pieces of white or multi-coloured cloth with patterns of red, yellow and green went there. The Gadaba girls in colourful printed clothes made of *kerang* jute also went to the same market. They wore round-shaped rings in their ears hanging down to the shoulders; red ribbons were tied in their hair—all of them were dressed in the same style. Sometimes while walking uphill, the stream of people would stop awhile, and pointing at the mound someone would say, "Look, there stands Dadi Budha." At times one would offer a flower or a fruit at his feet. Many would prostrate themselves. Dadi Budha looked at their strange gestures. He looked around but never said anything because he did not have a mouth; he was a god.

The turban on his bald head, Dadi Budha stood quietly in the scorching heat of Baisakh and endured the downpour in the month of Jyestha, when the farmers in the field sang:

The rains come down violently
In the month of Jyestha

Dadi Budha braved the cold wind of the month of Kartik, undisturbed, like the starry sky of the night. He felt no sorrow, no pain; he had no heart. Because he was a god, he had nothing else to do but to stand quietly and watch.

In a few days a huge termite mound rose beside Dadi Budha. It grew rapidly in size and it seemed that it would soon exceed Dadi Budha in height. The villagers did not do any harm to it because consulting his almanac the *dishari* declared that since Dadi Budha was left all alone, he had summoned another heavenly spirit to come and stand beside him. Both Dadi Budha and Hunka Budha cast their benign gaze on the village. While making a wish devotees would scrap some dust off Hunka Budha's body. Considering it sacred they would apply a bit of it on their forehead and taste a bit. For all the villagers—those who were childless, those having indigestion, those who had been ailing for a long time—it became routine to offer their homage to Dadi Budha.

Life flowed on.

3

Thenga Jani was Ram Muduli's only son. No doubt he would succeed his father as the headman of the village. He would get a turban and a couple of buttons, one of which carried the picture of the king and the other that of the king's grandson. If the *amin* of the revenue office was pleased with him, no one could prevent him from discharging the duties of a headman. For this reason he was held in high esteem.

During the daytime Thenga Jani looked after his father's field. When evening came he ran to the *dhangda*-hall, the hall for unmarried young men. The *dhangdi*-hall for unmarried young women stood on the other side of the road.

In the *dhangda*-hall the young men sang to the accompaniment of the *dungdunga,* a musical instrument made by wrapping a dried animal skin over a dry gourd; at both corners two long sticks were stuck, joined by a thin wire. When struck, the thin wire vibrated and produced a sound. The singer beat upon the gourd rhythmically with the palm of one hand and the ring finger of the other.

As the evening advanced the sound of Thenga Jani's *dungdunga* would rise above the buzzing of the mosquitoes. Then he would break into song.

From the *dhangdi*-hall, Hari Jani's daughter, Saria Daan would reply in song, waving words.

Then there would follow a duel of songs. Thenga's friends, Puruna Mandia and Podha Bandhu, would join him. The girls from the other side would join Saria. Waves of youthful love would surge through the forest.

Ram Muduli asked Eleo: "Listen dear, wouldn't it be nice to ask Saria Daan's hand for Thenga?"

Eleo replied: "Fine, It will be a very good match. Who else is there in the whole village to equal Jani's status?"

Ram Muduli said: "Let us wait. Thenga is still a boy. Let a few more days pass. Let him decide for himself."

All the girls of the village had set their eyes on Thenga Jani.

Who wouldn't like to be the daughter-in-law of the headman's family? When Thenga sang, Champabati or Suan Phoola or someone else would sing in reply. Waves of song reached Thenga. At times Thenga lost his mental balance while passing by the riverside alone. Thenga would sometimes pause and reflect: Whom should he choose as his wife? He could not keep himself from responding to others nor could he single someone out from a group and lavish his love on her.

The girls of the village danced around a log of fire in the moonlit night weaving their arms together. Thenga Jani and his three other friends twined their hands and stood. Four young men made a circle and four others climbed upon their shoulders. The eight of them danced moving in a circle. The girls danced to the drumbeats as they passed in and out through the space between the young men. While dancing some of these girls would deliberately slow down when they passed Thenga. Some even bumped into him. Thenga would feel like going away with one of the girls to Dadi Budha's mound, leaving the dance. He was young. Dreams interrupted his thoughts. When he thought of one girl, the shadow of another fell across his heart. He would hesitate.

The tribal girl, sharp-featured and turmeric yellow in complexion, melted in the sun like butter. Her beautiful eyes cast penetrating glances. Her top-knot was neatly tied and adorned with a bunch of small flowers. The colour of the saree wrapped round her body was red like that of the morning sky. Full of the vigour of youth, she walked like a deer.

Before the eyes of Thenga Jani floated the pictures of groups of young women. Above the yellow *alasi* fields, above the bluish green ragi fields, their loud laughter threw a mist of enchantment over the mind. Thenga would feel excited. His mind would grow hazy. Into this deeply passionate experience would enter the thorn and flowers of feeling. Dadi Budha stood as a seven-edged log keeping himself above from all kinds of feelings. Nothing could hurt him, nothing could delight him. Never did he get fatigued. Thenga's heart got pierced by the arrow of passion. His mind smouldered. He felt a burning sensation. But despite all this no particular girl could occupy his heart. He laughed, played, jumped but always stopped at the threshold.

The girls cracked jokes with him. They enjoyed doing it, for he never went very far. He had a well-built body; he was handsome. His beautiful eyes looked like clouds floating over the sky, arousing a desire which he never fulfilled. He remained invincible. Hence, according to the rules governing relationships between men and women, he had to be assaulted until he yielded.

Thenga responded to the battle-cry coming through the songs from the *dhangdi-hall*, the songs of good old days. He challenged the girls to a duel of songs in order to test the strength of their youthful passion. And the girls replied by patting each other and shouting 'wah-wah'. They received replies in songs. At night Thenga would become restless and would turn in his bed, but his legs would not carry him to the other side of the road.

The turbanned Dadi Budha on the hillock alone knew to what extent he understood the feelings of a human being.

One day at sunset Saria Daan was passing along the village path carrying a few freshly plucked maize. Thenga Jani was walking downhill with his herd of cows. They came face to face. A broad smile on his face, Thenga asked Saria: "Will you give me one ?"

Saria smiled and offered him a maize. Thenga took her palm in his grip and pulled her slightly. But the next moment he withdrew and walked off. He did not take the maize.

Another day, at noontime, Kamli, the daughter of Smara Paraja, was coming down the hill towards the village after filling her pot with water from the stream. Thenga Jani, a lathi upon his shoulders with two or three gourds tied to it, was on his way to the fields. All on a sudden Kamli slipped. Her earthen pot was not broken but water spilled out of it. She sprained her legs and started weeping. Thenga rushed to her. He dropped his lathi and gourds on the ground and lifted her. Kamli cried out in pain and could not rise to her feet. There was no one around. It was a low-lying place shaded by trees. The way to the fields on the other side passed through it. Silence dominated the surroundings. Thenga stared at Kamli with pity and tried to measure the depth of her eyes. Then he lowered his face. After helping Kamli to stand he left in a hurry to hide his excitement.

Thenga had been seeing these girls since his childhood, when

they went about naked. But these days they gave him quite a start when he came across them. Stray thoughts would cross his mind. But soon he would regain his composure.

Dadi Budha stood silently on his mound.

Every day Ram, the headman, went up to Dadi Budha and prostrating before him prayed: "Dadi Budha, please give me a suitable bride for my Thenga. She should be beautiful and should be strong enough to work in the fields. She must also take care of us, the old parents." In the quiet evenings, when the valley below Dadi Budha and Hunka Budha was plunged in darkness, the music of the *dungdunga* would come from the *dhangda-hall.* When this was joined by the buzzing sound of the mosquitoes, a strange music was produced. Ram, the headman, would repeatedly bow to Dadi Budha. He said: "Dadi Budha, last year, five of my cows died, let it not happen this year. I'll offer you chickens and pigeons. I shall offer you wine. Please do not let this happen again; or else I shall die."

Sometimes Hari Jani also came to plead his case: "Dadi Budha, please arrange my daughter Saria Daan's marriage with Thenga Jani. I shall present you a bullock and a tin of cooked wine."

A lot of *puja* was offered to Dadi Budha. Hunka Budha grew taller.

Occasionally some village girls would come with flowers. They would form a circle and entwine their hands to form a chain and move round and round Dadi Budha. One by one, they would come close to Dadi Budha and whispering someone's name in his ears; deck him with garlands. Giggling and pinching each other they would break away from the group and run away.

No one was ever disappointed.

Everyone would hope and wait. One day or other their hopes would bear fruit. Dadi Budha would not cheat them.

Innumerable chickens were sacrificed in front of Dadi Budha, a lot of wine was poured on the ground before him. Dry flowers remained scattered all around.

At midnight three or four persons would come. They sported thick black moustaches and beards. Their bodies massaged with oil glittered in the dark. Each wore only a piece of loin cloth. They were Dombs, whom the police wandered through the dense forest searching for.

They also would plead: "Please do not let the police come for inspection today. Let the inspector get into some trouble. Dadi Budha, we left for work in the night daring the wild animals. Please see that we're not brought to book. Let us find something—let us not return empty-handed tonight. You alone are our true well-wisher. Who else is there to listen to our prayers ?"

They would prostrate themselves before Dadi Budha and then melt into the darkness, a new hope warming their heart.

On the river-bank Saria Daan, while scrubbing her friend Saria Phoola's neck, whispered: "Today I heard my father say to my mother that if the headman came to ask my hand for his son, he would not refuse him even if he pays only forty rupees as bride-price."

And thus giggling she dipped into the water.

Saria Phoola said: "My father was discussing the same thing with my uncle, and asked him to go and speak to the headman about it."

They looked at each other for a while, the fire of jealousy burning behind their smiles.

Then looking up at the sky above, Daan said: "Oh dear, it's already midday. How long shall we bathe ?" That very day, in the witch-light of dusk, Saria Daan went to Dadi Budha. She saw Saria Phoola walking down the mound. Daan asked: "Where had you been, dear ?"

Phoola replied: "Our sow is missing and I come here searching for her. I thought she might have come here. And where are you going ?"

Daan said: "I am going to the fields. The area below is too crowded."

The two friends stared at each other. Then each turned back and went their separate ways.

When Saria Daan reached Dadi Budha she found a fresh garland around his turban. She pulled it off, tore it into pieces and flung it away. She replaced it with her own garland made of red hibiscus, which she had brought concealed in her clothes. And then holding Dadi Budha tightly in her arms, she whispered: "You will wear my flowers. Don't touch the flowers of others, or else I shall get angry with you. I won't eat anything. And I know you'll do what I want."

And then looking all around to be sure that nobody was present, Saria Daan fell flat before Dadi Budha. On a piece of rock lying just in front of him, she struck her head about twenty times. Then she came home.

On that day the friendship between these two girls, Saria Daan and Saria Phoola, came to an end.

The water of river Muran glittered in the rays of the setting sun. A shoal of *kainsari* fish swam towards the bank. There were big rocks on the river-bed, forming platforms here and there. Water hyacinths and fungi grew between these rocks. Thenga Jani would sit on one of these, his legs stretched out, a fishing rod in his hand. Attached to the rod was a small live-fish and near the head of the fish a hair from a cow's tail was tied in a knot. A small leaf-cup containing a little castor oil was tied to his cloth around his waist. Thenga Jani would take his *pinka,* smoke a bit, and put the *pinka* back behind his ear. Then taking the rod out of water he would apply a little oil to the hook and again throw it into the water. He would sit silently waiting for a big *kainsari* fish to bite.

The forest grew dark. Thenga would concentrate on fishing. Flocks of cranes and kingfishers came and perched on the rock in the evening. In the slow breeze *kurai* flowers tossed their heads from one side to the other. On either bank stood long rows of plants with small yellow flowers that waved gently in the breeze.

Thenga Jani would sit there for a long time, fishing. From the bathing *ghats* of the village would come the sound of giggling and of pots being filled with water. A strip of land would be visible.

Thenga Jani would forget to apply castor oil to his hook. He would forget to smoke. And gazing at the water he would think; his thoughts knew no bounds. The shadow of his own face lengthened over the water.

Darkness deepened. The sound of wild animals was heard. Thenga's mind oscillated between his present and his future. Memory pricked his mind. He failed to come to a solution. There was a melody in the darkness, like a breeze under a frosty sky.

Thenga's father would wonder why his son had not come home yet. His delay would worry his mother. Her son had taken rice-water a long time before. How long would it keep him going ?

The son would return. His father felt proud of him. Yes, he was

his son—his support in his old age. Enemies would be afraid of him.

All this was Dadi Budha's bounty.

Thenga's mother was hardpressed for time; she got excited over matters concerning her son. She passed days and nights dreaming of her son's future. Parents dreamt of their son's future, his marriage. A bride would come to their house. She would look around with her bright inquisitive eyes; she would walk gently. She would bring water for the old man's bath. She would not let her mother-in-law enter the kitchen and cook ragi. She the newly-wed bride.

On the river-bank looking up to Dadi Budha the old lady would pray to him, her palms tightly clasped. She would even forget to wrap the cloth properly around her body. The villagers received commands every day from the headman: "Sacrifice a chicken today", "Today arrange a special *puja*", "Cook wine today."

Dadi Budha looked as if he was smiling.

Both Hari Jani and Ram Muduli would go from village to village and collect revenue. Ram would talk about his son, Thenga, and Hari about his daughter, Saria. Chancheri, the barber, carrying a lathi, which he had inherited from his forefathers, followed them. Sometimes he would nod his head, agreeing with what the headman said and sometimes with what Jani said. They would visit many villages. They would bring a chicken or a goat as a gift for the officer. These men would negotiate the rocky, slippery downward path of the valley. Sometimes Muduli and Jani would stare at each other, as if they both wanted to ask something. Ram would not ask for Saria Daan for his son. Hari dared not speak about the bride-price. Days passed.

The girls of the village looked forward to hearing Thenga Jani's song. Dadi Budha stared calmly at the empty sky. Only Hunka Budha was full of play. Termites moving on it in rows resembled a procession. On each side sat a frog with its tongue continuously going in and out, greedy like a moneylender. Dadi Budha would not move. About him there was no bustle. He was very quiet, but the world around him was restless.

The villagers had already earmarked some parts of the forest to be cleared for cultivation. They had felled and burnt some big trees

on all sides of the area. One day wine would be cooked; a hundred and fifty axes would strike at the trees—sal, mango, tamarind, all would crash to the ground. The men of the forest would till the land after clearing the trees and churning the mud there. What did they get from the forest? The forest belonged to the king, the tiger belonged to the forest, but to them belonged only a handful of rice, *alasi*, *suan*, ragi and castor, which the cleared patches yielded. Then the forester would come one day, inspect the area and drag them to the law-court. They would pray to Dadi Budha and proceed to the court at an auspicious hour fixed by the *dishari*. They would pay a fine. At least something would remain for them, even if they had to part with a portion of their daily bread.

History turned its leaves. At the foot of Dadi Budha's mound, by the side of the stream, illicit wine was being cooked. On the hearth was a pot full of stale *mahula*. On its mouth was fitted a small earthen pot plastered with cow-dung. It was connected to a covered pot by means of a pipe. Inside it there was yet another small pot in which wine was being collected. The preparation of the wine went on after a *puja* had been offered to Dadi Budha. Wine had turned the eyes of the men red. Their stomachs were filled with it. They kept laughing. There was no sunlight over the hills, no stars. There was only the heat of the fire. Wine-making was in progress.

Dadi Budha gazed at it. He looked as if he was smiling.

One day in the month of *alasi* flowers, when Diwali festival was round the corner, Thenga Jani came down the Pachedi hill. He would reach the low-lying Lulla village after crossing the hill. The midday sun gave him a sweet warmth. It intoxicated him and made his mind swing.

The valley was not deep, but it was surrounded by a number of jagged hills. These hills had been cleared and the open space had been used for raising *alasi*. It was yellow everywhere. A sluggish stream flowed in the valley, half-hidden from the eye. On either side of it stretched light green paddy fields. The plants had grown waist-high. There was a wavy red ridge, like a streak of vermilion.

Thenga Jani felt elated. He ran up to a rock which hung over the stream, and stood on it silently. He looked around just as a hunter would before clearing his barrel for shooting at the target.

There was no one around. Only the frolicking sunrays of the month of Kartik came pouring down and beckoned Thenga. Thenga saw Santosh Kumari getting out of the stream. She was the daughter of Eleo's brother, Aleibiria. Water dripped from her loose hair. There was no cloth around her body. She had always wanted to see Thenga and now at last she caught a glimpse of him. She walked off to a secluded place and turning her face towards him dried her hair. Then she put on a green saree, wore a blouse and buttoned it. Thenga Jani watched her spell-bound, his heart pounding. Santosh Kumari, her hair hanging loose, started turning and twisting her body. Then all on a sudden, as if she had become aware of Thenga's presence just at the moment, she pulled her saree up to her neck. She turned her back and went away with slow steps.

Thenga Jani did not stop there. Initially he felt awkward. He hesitated, could not decide whether he should go his own way or follow Santosh Kumari. Curiosity prevailed over him and he followed her.

One had to cross the bed of the stream in order to climb over the hill on the other side of the valley. The slope was a steep one. It was covered with various creepers and climbers. A thin streak of water flowed down to the river. The surrounding silence deepened the music of flowing water.

There was a narrow uphill path, full of bushes and creepers, which was cool and shadowy like a tunnel. Down that solitary path under the shade of the trees walked two persons: Aleibiria's daughter, Santosh Kumari, and following her closely, Ram Muduli's son, Thenga Jani. They were the only human beings in that quiet scene.

Santosh Kumari walked lazily. The fringe of her saree got caught in the thorns of a flowery creeper. Her legs got entangled in the small roots of a tree. She bent and tried to free herself. She slowly loosened her saree. With quick heartbeats she did the buttons of her half-open blouse. She paused awhile. The burning eyes of Thenga Jani followed her. Santosh Kumari giggled. Thenga's heart raced.

A few moments passed. Thenga and Santosh reached a large rock-bed, surrounded by trees and creepers. There were rock walls

on their left and on their right. A narrow stream flowed in front of them. The path ran downhill. There were two holes on the rock-bed, like hoof-marks of a deer. Water dripped from a large piece of leaning rock. Santosh Kumari sat on it, stretched out her legs, and began scrubbing them. Thenga Jani slowly climbed the hill. Kumari looked at him and smiled. She said : "Why do you stare at me like that? Not even a word on your lips?" Having said this, she lay herself down on the rock, her body shaking with laughter. Thenga stood before her, his face bathed in sweat.

Without opening her mouth Thenga helped her up in his arms. Holding her close to his chest he carried her to the other side of the rock.

The misty sky spread overhead. Yellow *alasi* plants grew in the deep valley below the Karamanga hill; light green paddy fields, encircled by the river, glistened.

4

The world is a strange place. A million desires gnawing at their hearts, so many people spend their lives looking hungrily at the expanse of burning sands. Their lives come to an end but their desires remain unfulfilled. Only he who stretches out his hand gets something. He at least satisfies his physical hunger, although his thirst, his desire grows intenser. Those who wait keep on waiting. From the top of the mound Dadi Budha only watches. And beneath him, in this world, so many people keep waiting and hoping.

Santosh Kumari would not wait. She impressed people so that they would forget that she was a Domb girl; the only thing they would remember about her was that she was Santosh Kumari, young, lively and vivacious. She had been to Koraput many a time to listen to Christian sermons. She did not remember all the rituals taught to her. But she remembered the church tower, where the bell rang. Festivals were celebrated. She thoroughly enjoyed this new experience and became one with it. She remembered the other Domb girls, neat and clean, wearing printed sarees and blouses, and moving joyfully from one side to the other. She had learnt how to keep herself clean, how to wear a blouse and a saree. She had learnt to match her behaviour with the occasion. Indeed she had learnt a great deal. The only thing she had not learnt was to wait and expect things to happen. On dark nights she had seen loaded lorries halting on the town square. She had seen huge men carrying sticks rushing to places; she had seen dark roads from inside running trucks. She had learnt to savour the comfort of rest houses in dark rainy nights. After seeing all these she had come to realise that no one in this world waited for anyone else. Water rolled down; it was only a rock that stood still for ever.

Koraput—the white city with flickering lights on the hilltop—had long since found a place in Santosh Kumari's dreams. But it was only a dream that would come there twice or three times a year. The thirst in her heart remained unquenched. For her the forest was like a desert, always the same. Only the drowsy forest, rocks and trees and fields, here and there. People never came out of their

houses. They came out only to cut down trees or work in the fields. Rice was cooked, sweet potatoes were dug up, spinach was washed all day. Paraja boys and girls danced. The Parajas looked down upon the Dombs. How many Domb families were there after all? Only four. And only three *dhangdas*. Beniamani never shaved his beard nor washed his face. As for Masik—who would care to look at him? Simon had a bulging stomach—probably he was ill with some disease. Masik was ugly but he alone could smoothly remove the hide of a dead cow. True, he knew his business. But he was ugly. Santosh Kumari could never stand him.

During the dance at night the seven Domb girls, their hands around each others' waist, waving a piece of cloth, jumping and shouting, would pass through the line of Paraja girls and surround Paraja boys and dance. The night grew darker as they drank and danced.

Only then one could keep the forest out of one's mind.

One could also forget the forest at Nadigaan market, where the Dombs of the different villages greeted each other rubbing palms and where they moved hurriedly from one place to another.

Memory could occasionally hurt. The experience of a couple of days in the town would recur in the mind. In that smoky dream one would see wide roads, vehicles passing one after another. Trucks loaded with tribal boys and girls bursting with laughter: they were heading for Assam. Assam—the very name was intoxicating. It was a different place altogether. Only tall officers carrying sticks. And of course varieties of sarees, coloured blouses—parrot prints, star prints, tiger prints. The air over there would be heavy with the smell of scented oil in the hair. And barrel after barrel of wine.

A feeling of loneliness would come over Santosh Kumari. She would think, there was no one she could call her own. There was no one whom she could point at with a smile and say: "He's mine, my man."

Masik—how ugly ! Half his face seemed to be missing. It seemed as if his body was rubbed with cow fat all over. And his skin was hard like a buffalo's.

Santosh Kumari watched her own reflection in the water. Her eyes gleamed; she wanted to revolt. Recollecting a couple of days' experience in the town, she felt burning sensations. It seemed to

her as if she carried with her the endless forests and hills and Masik, Simon and Beniamani. She was discontented, and her desire had many faces.

Santosh Kumari was unique. This uniqueness separated her from the Saria Daans and Saria Phoolas. To Thenga Jani she seemed new and different every moment, like the changing hue of sunlight in the forest. She was always fresh, evergreen.

Since their first meeting Santosh Kumari had remained self-possessed. She would not lose her self-control any more. But Thenga Jani was lost. His heart throbbed violently; his ears had become more sensitive and his eyes roamed about eagerly. When would she come? Along which path?

Santosh Kumari came. Yet she did not. At times when they met, she only smiled at Thenga. Occasionally they met while passing by the turning. That was all. Nothing beyond that.

Thenga would dream of her throughout the night. He would not like to spend his time in the *dhangda*-hall. He would only wait for her, day and night.

It was absolutely impossible fer Thenga to open his mouth and speak to her. It was unnatural. They belonged to two different tribes. His father would be angry and his mother shocked. The neighbours would convene a *panchayat* meeting and demand a feast of wine and chicken.

That meeting with Santosh Kumari had left Thenga very much disturbed. He felt as if someone was watching him suspiciously from behind the shrubs and creepers. He felt as if somebody was waiting for the right moment to reveal his secret. He grew suspicious. Deep inside him a wave of emotions continually lashed his heart. The more he tried to subdue his emotions the more they would surface. The memory of Santosh Kumari spread over his mind's horizon. Wherever he looked only she appeared.

After so many days Thenga's heart leapt for one out of so many. And all memories were like the flower plants on both sides of a stream.

Saria Daan would look at him with plums tied to her saree around her waist. Thenga Jani would not shy away any more. He would look straight at her. Plucking some fruit from the thorny branches of the plum tree he would also reply to her jokes. While

looking at the glittering knot in her hair he would, at times feel his heart slipping out of control. But he controlled himself. He would whistle all along the way returning home.

In the *dhangda*-hall Thenga responded to the songs of the girls in a quivering voice. It was a shrill voice, not a flat one. But sometimes while singing he would be distracted and would stop abruptly. Sleep overcame him early. But he would wake up suddenly at midnight. He would gaze through the darkness and ultimately feel too tired and go to sleep again. And then he would fall into a deep slumber and get up long after everyone else.

At times Thenga would go to Dadi Budha and bow to him. He would feel that in doing so the burden weighing in his mind lightened. He would sit quietly in front of the date-palm tree. There would be silence everywhere.

5

One day Thenga Jani's parents had a quarrel. His mother said: "I have only one son and though he has already become a young man, you are doing nothing about his marriage. You are not a poor man. You don't have to run around and arrange the bride-price."

Thenga's father replied: "Have I ever been niggardly in offering the bride-price? Marriage can take place only when the boy wants to marry. What can I do ?"

Thenga's mother: "Do you think everyone in this world is shameless like you? You took me away by force and married me—it was an *udulia* marriage. Will everyone do that kind of thing?"

Thenga's father: "If that's how you think, arrange his rnarriage today—with whomsoever he wishes."

Thenga's mother: "Yes, I know, I know. You think that you will have to spend a lot on bride-price. Moreover, if your son gets married who will go and watch the ripe corns in the fields at night? Do you really find it difficult to arrange a bride for him ? That's only an excuse, I know. But you see, he's my only son."

Ram Muduli's temper shot high. He knew that Thenga's mother was obstinate. But when she passed a remark on his own marriage, he could not help losing his temper. True, his was an *udulia* marriage. According to this custom, the boy, after getting the girl's consent, kidnapped her, covering her mouth with a piece of cloth to prevent her from screaming. The boy brought his would-be bride to his house and gave a small feast to a few. There was no elaborate ceremony, no music, no drum, no canopy, nothing of the sort. The girl's father, searching for his daughter, would finally come. The *panchayat* met to settle the matter for only a small amount of the bride-price. This was how an *udulia* marriage took place. It was more common among poorer people who could not afford to spend larger amounts. A long time had passed since his marriage, but his wife's anger had not yet subsided. She never forgot, hers was an *udulia* marriage. Every now and then she raised the topic to silence her husband in an argument and hurt him.

In the morning Ram Muduli had left for the fields without taking food. The usual time for the midday meal for Paraja people was past. Still he had not returned from his fields. He remained busy developing a piece of land for cultivation. He almost forgot his anger in the process of digging the earth. His only aim was to build a small dam across the plot so that soil would deposit there and it would become ready for use. Chest-high crops would grow there next year, he thought. He also calculated how many pots of cooked wine he would need for the labourers. These people preferred wine to money. What should be the width of the dam, what should be the size of the plot—these thoughts occupied him. On either side grew various kinds of shrubs and spinach. At times his spade dug up handfuls of sweet potato. He thought of taking a few home; they tasted sweet. His wife cooked them with ground ragi preparing a delicious curry.

The more one toiled in the scorching heat, the more one became hungry; the more one felt hungry, the more furious one became. Ram Muduli's wife would not understand. She would only repeat her allegation that the boy's father was sitting quietly, waiting for his son to marry the *udulia* way.

Sitting under the shadow of a tree Ram Muduli listened to the sound of running water and the rustle of leaves. Placing a dry twig on a piece of wood and rolling it between his palms for some time he lighted it at one corner. Then he smoked. The more he remembered the morning's incident the harder he pulled at his *pinka*. He thought he must arrange Thenga's marriage as soon as possible if only to silence the old woman. He would offer sixty to eighty rupees as the bride-price; he would give a feast that would cost him another sixty rupees.

Presently Ram headed for Eleo's house. Eleo belonged to the Domb tribe, but he was intelligent. He was widely travelled; he had seen sahibs and the court house. He was quite old, older than Ram Muduli. He would listen attentively to the questions put to him and would reply only after thought. In serious matters Ram, the headman, consulted him secretly. In the presence of others he would disagree with him and laugh at his words. But, adding a little to what Eleo had said, he would say almost the same thing.

All along the way Ram thought how surprised his wife would

be when she heard of her husband's resolve. Never again would she dare open her mouth. She had always made fun of him for being miserly. She ridiculed him by mentioning their own *udulia* marriage. As if he was really a miser! As if he did not want to spend! Thenga's mother would see that he, the headman of the village, could spend on one marriage an amount spent on ten marriages.

Eleo was sitting on the verandah, preparing an account of the levy collected. He used to collect four annas per plough from every Christian farmer and give the amount to the pastor, who would send it to the missionary. It was the sahib who spent the money. The church had to be white-washed. Festivals were celebrated. And of course there were the schools. Would this meagre amount suffice? But then it would certainly be of some help. Devout Christians ought to pay at least this much.

Standing nearby, Aleibiria's daughter, Santosh Kumari, fed the pigs with stale ragi from an earthen pot. It was already late in the afternoon when Ram arrived. The headman said to Eleo: "Dear, I'll get my son, Thenga, married."

Eleo said: "Really ? Fine. Have you already found a bride for him ?"

The headman was taken aback. How foolish he was ! All the way he had only thought of the bride-price and the ceremony. He had given no thought to the bride at all. He was at once reminded of Saria Daan, but he was reluctant to mention her name. She was after all a girl from his own village. He said to Eleo: "You find the girl."

Eleo: "Why should I find a girl for Thenga? Why should he not do it himself ?"

The headman: "How long should I wait ?"

Eleo: "Who arranged a bride for you, my dear ?"

They both laughed. Sitting at a distance Santosh Kumari also laughed.

The headman continued: "No dear, you don't know. Today I had a quarrel with Thenga's mother..."

He narrated the whole incident of that morning.

Eleo laughed again. At last he asked: "Saria Daan ?"

The headman looked grave and said: "Yes, she is there. But do you know any other suitable girl ?"

Eleo "Why should you leave your own village and search for a girl elsewhere?"

A little later he said: "All right, we'll think over the matter."

From a distance Santosh Kumari blinked her eyes in astonishment. The pigs pushed their snouts into the pot to get their feed. The younger ones unable to reach it. Santosh Kumari could not pay her attention to it.

The headman then went to the *dishari's* house. He had been deeply hurt by his wife's words. He would settle the matter, and then return home.

He reached the *dishari's* place and said to him: "I shall get Thenga married."

The *dishari:* "Do it *naik*, do it."

The headman: "It can take place only when you choose an auspicious moment."

The *dishari:* "Yes, I shall do it. I won't say 'no' to you. Let the right time for it come. This is the month of Magha. Let Magha and Phagun pass. A Paraja marriage cannot take place until the month of Chaita comes. Let Chaita come, then you come to me. I shall fix the date after consulting the almanac and the *gurumai.* Go and make preparations. Start by storing paddy and ragi."

The headman: "That will be done in due course. First find a bride, *dishari.*"

"Bride!" the *dishari* was amazed. "Who am I to look for a bride? The boy himself will choose one for himself. I shall find an auspicious hour. You will perform the marriage. I shall attend the wedding feast. I shall take part in the drinking, dancing and revelry. I shall pray to Dadi Budha for the bride and the groom. What else can I do? How can I select a bride for your son?"

The old *dishari* was confused. He had nothing to do with the relation between a *dhangada* and a *dhangdi.* His job was to pray for them, to offer *puja* to the god. The headman's words puzzled him. He was usually grave. He did not talk a lot. His mute god had made him mute. But in any case the very idea of one choosing a bride for someone else was absurd. And impossible as well. Among the hill-tribes none other than the young man himself chose his bride. Some other person doing it for him was unheard of.

The *dishari* wondered if the headman was joking with him.

He did not like jokes. He always kept himself busy in his work. He had given up joking long ago. Forty or fifty years ago. Owing to his poverty he could not pay the bride-price—forty rupees it was—and had to work as a bonded labourer at his in-law's place for four years. The name of his wife was Mangli. Although they met each other all the three hundred and sixty five days a year, they could not, as was the custom, see each other's faces for these four years. The custom was strictly adhered to those days. Man then had a sense of dignity. He had physical strength as well.

Then came Kamli. For five years only. She died of a fever leaving behind a three year old son, Jhalia, The *dishari* spent ten years bringing up Jhalia. One day the boy died.

The old *dishari* had never laughed since that day. From under his thick eyebrows, he gave a sharp look at the headman: "How can I choose a bride for your son, my dear?" he asked.

The headman replied: "As you please. Choose the bride at an auspicious moment."

The *dishari:* "Go home and ask your son. Marry him to whomever he wants.

The headman: "He will say 'What do I know? You can fix up my marriage with whomever you like'."

The *dishari* said gravely: "Ask him first."

The headman thought, since he had come out with a purpose, he would have to finalise his son's marriage. He would settle his marriage with someone or the other. He was thoughtful and he made his way to Dadi Budha. He threw himself on the ground and said: " Dadi Budha, find a girl for my son. Arrange his marriage."

Below him were the huts. In that scorching heat everything seemed lifeless. Lying flat before Dadi Budha, Ram Chandra Muduli, the village headman, found solace.

The headman prayed to Dadi Budha. He felt relieved. He returned home. But he failed to make his choice. He could not decide who should be his daughter-in-law. Whenever he asked Thenga, he received almost the same reply: he did not know. Either Thenga could not tell his father who he had in mind or he had not yet decided. The old man thought of Saria Daan. But then it would be better if he saw a few other girls before taking a decision. Jani might demand a huge amount as bride-price. Moreover, Saria Daan

belonged to this very village. It might happen — someone better and more beautiful might be found elsewhere.

That very day the headman started building a new house, the house where Thenga Jani and his wife were to live.

But a bride was yet to be found.

Soon word spread in the village that the headman was looking for a daughter-in-law. Birds and animals were sacrificed before Dadi Budha; flowers gathered in a heap at his feet; wine was poured on the ground. Hari Jani offered a new turban to Dadi Budha.

People knew. But no one dared say anything.

6

Thenga Jani was in a quandary.

The more one saw Santosh Kumari, the more one desired to see her. But one's desire was never quenched. She made one hungry, when she was most satisfied.

Kumari was always new, always fresh. She never came close to Thenga, only looked at him from a distance. When they met she only smiled at him and went off leaving behind Thenga's throbbing heart. Thenga would run after her on one pretext or another, but failed to reach her.

In the *dhangda*-hall when Thenga's friends made jokes about his approaching marriage, he felt as if they had buried a dagger into his heart. The hall was too warm for him. He felt as if songs coming out of the *dhangdi*-hall were all confusing. He went in and out of the *dhangda*-hall a number of times.

Thenga Jani was unable to concentrate.

At times he felt he could forget Santosh Kumari. But while passing by the bathing ghat his feet would slow down. Something would pass through his mind and he would stop there awhile. Then he would meet Santosh Kumari. She would not speak to him. She would only smile, turn back and go her own way.

On a melancholy moonlit night Thenga Jani sat on a large piece of rock in front of the *dhangda*-hall. Behind him was a big banyan tree. The land before him sloped down. Tiny hamlets at the foothills were hidden from view. One could see only a narrow path. On the right side were three or four houses. On the left one could see a couple of roofs. Beyond the roofs was the valley, a few trees here and there and shrubs forming a hedgerow on one side of the Muran. Sitting on that rock one could gaze at the beautiful fields lying below; beyond the fields was the round-shaped hill of the village Lulla.

The misty moonlight created a sea of silvery light in the deep valley. Countless shadows, big and small, floated over the waves of moonlight.

On the top of the hill hung the full moon—the round, clear and smiling highland moon.

Thenga Jani sat all by himself. Everything around him was quiet. From the *dhangda*-hall came the sound of snoring which was like the chirping of birds.

On the village *veraman* lay scattered stones—pointed as well as flat—half-buried in the ground. It was as if generations of the dead lay asleep under the shade of the trees.

No one was awake. Everything was still.

Thenga Jani sat facing the valley, his mind engrossed in thought. An old lathi lay across his lap. His thoughts were wayward. He only listened to the music of his heart.

It was a bewitching night. On this *veraman* so many people had danced. The dust of their feet had mingled. But had their hearts been united ? So many people, half-naked, and living on rice-water had left the world after toiling day and night, braving winter and rough weather. No one had written down their history. These pointed and flat stones remained as their only memorials.

Stories of so many hearts remained untold. The deeply concealed craving of one's heart remained confined within the prison of one's body till the very end. Sometimes two hearts failed to recognize each other, and wandered about seeking partners. But the search led nowhere.

The heat-wave of the summer, the torrential downpour of the monsoon, the havoc caused by the storm—the man of the forest felt all this in his bones before he died, leaving behind him only a pointed or a flat stone.

Today on this solitary village path the departed souls had at least reached their final destination—they were these stones lying close to each other. They were speechless, but there was no malice in their heart, no pain, no regret.

The union of hearts could not take place among the living beings. They were united only after death. Now these stones lay close to each other, when the heart no longer throbbed, sensations no longer ran through their nerves and their eyes did not open; everything was motionless and still. This world was like a washerman's ghat where clothes are washed everyday; today's clothes are not there tomorrow. Dust and dirt washed off their

hearts float away. We come to this world as clothes are brought to the ghat. We come here to be beaten, cleansed, to come and go.

In the silence of the night the Paraja ancestors, leaving their pointed and flat stone-abodes, appeared like shadows before the eyes of Thenga Jani. They were seen holding hands and singing:

Listen dear, Listen
Today is one day out of a hundred
And this is one month out of twelve
When we both are together
In this old ancestral place
In this vast world
Together are we
In the washerman's ghat.

In the shadowy moonlight the enchanting night revealed its magic before Thenga Jani. Shadows of well-built persons—his forefathers—wearing necklaces and rings and a smile on their faces, loomed before him. Their bright faces and their oily hair-knots shone. He heard their song:

Our mother brought us up
Our father brought us up
We grew up and became young men and women
Why then shall we keep quiet, why?
Let us entwine our hands and play
Drink and dance and be gay.

The shadows of the forefathers vanished.

The spirit of the ancestral man had called his woman to the tune of the *dungdunga*: "Come my dear, come."

Living forms had been changed into stones; the rhythm of the music had mingled with the darkness and the moon. Every day when darkness descended on the hills, those stones would come to life. These people had left the world; but their voices quivering with love were still there, preserved with great care in the gentle breeze of the night, to play over the ragi fields and tall trees of the dense forest. The loveborn voice of eternal man.

Thenga Jani woke up. He found himself sitting all alone; his body was wet with dew. The stones lay all around.

When he was about to rise and leave the place, his eyes fell upon a girl coming up the solitary path rustling her saree. Who could be this girl ? Thenga got excited, was it a *duma* ? He had heard that on such nights villages were visited by *dumas*, followed by a tiger. But this did not seem to be a *duma*, which normally appeared in the form of a seven or eight year old boy with red lips, bald head and yellow eyes. No, it was not the spirit of a dead woman. What was it then ?

Thenga's heart sank. The experience he had a while ago now tormented him. He tried his best to steel himself. Clutching his lathi he rose to his feet.

The figure approached him. From a distance he heard a thin voice: "Are you afraid, dear ?"

Thenga came close to her and whispered: "How come you are here at this unearthly hour, Kumari ?"

"I've come here on so many nights before. Is this new ? After all how far is our house from here ? It's only there round the bend. Sometimes I feel like coming here. I thought I'd go and see what Thenga was doing. But how does it matter to him ? I thought I'd hear his snore from the *dhangda*-hall and return."

In a trembling voice Thenga said: "Come here and we'll talk."

Kumari said: "No, someone may wake up. Come, we'll go down the road. It's empty, I've seen."

Without saying anything else Santosh Kumari walked down the path she had come up. Thenga followed her. In the silence of the night they walked along that lonely slippery path.

After some time, when the solitary star in the south sky started sinking lower and lower, Thenga asked Kumari: "Tomorrow again ?"

Santosh Kumari giggled and said: "All right, we'll come here and talk."

They went their separate ways.

7

The headman was building a new house for his son.

Bamboos were cut down; mud was prepared for plastering the walls. Many labourers were engaged in the work. Each received a seer of ragi and a little cooked wine as their daily wage.

The headman had asked Thenga to sit at the site and supervise the work. With some labourers he himself went down to the fields to prepare the land for cultivation.

Sometimes the headman thought there was no one in the world as happy as he.

He had been poor in his childhood. He had lost both his parents at a young age. He grew up, took a plot of land on lease and started working it. With hard labour he soon filled his house with paddy and ragi, and in time came to own land and cows. He had made his fields yield gold.

Ram Muduli grew rich and surpassed others in wealth and property. His grandfather, Hari, the headman, widower and issueless, had died at that time. The *amin* made Ram the headman of the village.

Since that day he had been leading a happy and contented life.

Ram had no daughter. A girl child would have brought him bride-price. But he did not let this bother him. He had his son, Thenga, who would be his stay and support in his old age.

From his childhood Thenga Jani had displayed good qualities. He was hard-working and well-mannered like his father. When the boy was eight, he looked after his father's cows. At the age of twelve, Thenga started working in the fields. When he became fifteen, half the responsibility of his father's family had already rested on his shoulders. He would take the labourers to the field, search for the cattle in the forest and find them one by one in the rain and in storm. Thenga was such a nice son; like a machine he would work for the prosperity of his father.

Whenever his father asked for his opinion, he would reply: "Why do you ask me? I agree to whatever you say."

The headman was constructing a new house, a house for his son to live in after his marriage. He was paying attention to every detail. Leaving the field work in the hands of the labourers, he came to sit on a rock in front of the new house and supervise the work. At times he would lend a helping hand. He would split the bamboos or carry the mud. At times he would only sit smoking a *pinka* and watch the progress of the work.

8

In the scorching heat the missionaries in black coats moved from one village to another preaching the message of Christianity. They sweated profusely, and their feet were blistered. Whenever they came across someone they would preach to him the message of their religion: Have faith in God, the Almighty, who sent his favorite son to wipe out the evil from the earth; have faith in Him alone.

These missionaries would have to move like this in rain and shine, in pain and pleasure, or else they would not get their salary, the sahib had said. Reverend Solomon of Pindapadar village often came here to deliver the holy message to the people of this area. His shining forehead reflected his strong faith in his religion. The religious message of a foreign land floated past the ears of Dadi Budha. Hunka Budha did not raise his head.

At midnight a group of thieves came to Dadi Budha's mound and whispered to him : "Oh Almighty Dadi Budha, believe us. We are not wicked at heart. We shall tell you the truth. It is our poverty that has driven us to steal someone's cows from his cowshed or a couple of plates from someone else's house. We take such risks only for our family. But these inspectors—these heretics—they don't believe in you. How can they understand our misfortune? You alone know it, lord."

There were many—Eleo, John, Alihander, Peter, Simon, Paul, Michael—who had embraced Christianity. But faith alone would not do. One had to repent and confess his or her crime. But what was the value of Reverend Solomon's preachings in courts, in society and in practical life? No missionary could save you when things got complicated. The formless heavenly God carried the burden of all our sins—that's fine. That was a piece of good news. He could forgive all of us. He would bear the burden on his shoulders. However one led one's life, all sins could be wiped off in his blood some day or other.

These converted tribals led their lives in their own way. When they wanted to know a god with a form, they became oblivious to

the pastor and looked up to Dadi Budha. They offered up several things to him. They also sacrificed chickens and pigeons. They belonged to both worlds. They had to manage like this somehow.

Santosh Kumari had grown up in such a world. She had heard the country gods ridiculed in the Christian assembly and described as evil spirits. But in the privacy of their homes, in lonely places, the converts prayed to Dadi Budha for strength and courage.

Santosh Kumari did not disrespect Dadi Budha or even Hunka Budha. It was good for her that in the flow of events the headman's son, Thenga, had leaned towards her. She had found a support. But a lot more had to be done. She quietly whispered to herself: "It's your kindness, Dadi Budha, your grace." Early in the morning, before sunrise, she would sometimes come to the mound, gather palm leaves and light them. Then she would say: "Dadi Budha, please listen to my prayers." She would think Dadi Budha was smiling at her, teasing her. After saying her prayers to Dadi Budha, she would go home.

Santosh Kumari would torment Thenga Jani with her smile whenever she passed him. She would not speak to him, would not even raise her head to look at him. With flowers in her hair she would walk, swaying her hips.

Thenga sulked. Ram Muduli, the headman, prepared himself to bring Saria Daan to his house as his daughter-in-law.

9

The headman was in a hurry. He would go to Hari Jani to ask for his daughter's hand for his son. There would be a little ceremony for which he needed five bottles of wine. That could be bought at any time. Moreover, five pots of wine had to be cooked. Stale ragi had to be fermented for seven days, otherwise it might not have the desired strength. Not only that, but a good saree for the bride was also necessary. One or two of gold ornaments for her nose or ears were required too. The *dishari* would choose an auspicious hour and date. Ram Muduli would have to go to the girl's place, summon a *panchayat* meeting, and settle the matter.

The end of winter was approaching. The mist would soon go. It would be cool and clear all around. The forest would be full of green leaves and new flowers. It would be spring time, which would excite the passion of the young. Muduli thought, it would be nice if everything was settled before that. The ceremony of asking for the girl should be over by that time.

The appoinred day arrived. Under the strict instructions of his father, Thenga had to work hard for the ceremony. His secret desire remained locked within him. If luck favoured him he would meet Santosh Kumari on quiet and solitary nights. They would have a little chat. Thenga passed his time, treasuring these moments of togetherness.

The word that a girl was being asked for Thenga spread through the village. Everyday Saria Daan's friends helped her dress up in various styles. Her father had bought her necklaces and rings of different designs from the market. These days she usually put on a yellow saree and appeared decked in ornaments. She walked with her head lowered. Occasionally she met Thenga on a narrow path. She would only cast a glance at him from the corner of her eyes, smile and go her way.

Thenga had to bear the jokes of his friends. He had to pretend to enjoy them. Although he smiled, his inner self was in a turmoil. He felt wretched.

Thenga Jani compared Saria Daan with Santosh Kumari. The difference was striking. Daan was fair and lovely, good and innocent. But she was simple like a cow. She left one cold. A man would not feel drawn to her. She could not entice a man. On the other hand, Kumari was alluring; her beauty was captivating. She could torment, she could fascinate.

Thenga Jani thought that Santosh Kumari meant nothing to him. He was going to marry Saria Daan; Kumari would belong to someone else. But whenever such thoughts crossed his mind, they were soon swept away by a wind of passion. He felt as if he would be unable to bear the torment any longer. Under the pretext of going for a stroll he at times would come to the Dornb settlement. May be, he would get a glimpse of Santosh Kumari.

On a dark lonely night, when cold winds were making the people shiver, Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari met. They met after a gap of about three weeks. Kurnari asked him frankly: "Why all this, Thenga ? How long ? They're going to ask for the bride soon. After a few days you will happily start your home with Saria Daan. So why this game of hide and seek ?" Her slow but shrill voice pierced Thenga's heart. She said : "You say your father's forcing you. You're a man, aren't you ? Don't you have a voice of your own ? Should one give you the idea of what to do and what not to ? You should take the course that suits you best. Why should I object ? At the beginning, I said, no. You turned a deaf ear to me. But it's no use now. We belong to different tribes. Society won't permit us to marry. It hasn't happened since our forefather's days. Now I have no one else except you. But you're the obedient son of your parents, very loyal to them. You'll forget the past and soon be settled in life with a family of your own. You may not even speak to me, even if I die."

Santosh Kumari ran off, her eyes full of tears. Thenga sat down with a heavy heart. He was unable to decide what to do, how to get out of this. He would feel relieved only if he could give a piece of his mind to his parents. He wished he could pull out his father's whiskers. But how could he defy his parents, who had never denied him anything ? Their son's happiness was the only thing that had always mattered to them. That was why they were so excited about his marriage. How could Thenga hurt them ? His strong feelings of defiance soon subsided. He admitted to himself that he could never do without their goodwill and blessings.

Thenga Jani often remained absent-minded. He would sit in one place for long hours, unaware of the presence of others. He lost his appetite. He worked only mechanically. He became active at night, when life entered the clay toy of a human body from some mysterious source. He roamed over the hill, restless and impatient. What was the way out, he wondered. Thenga's mother asked his father: "Why does our son look so depressed these days?"

His rather replied: "Why should he be depressed? How can someone who's going to marry feel depressed? He's fine. He eats and drinks, plays his *dungdunga* and sings songs. What else do you expect of him? Who can say he's depressed?"

Thenga's mother nodded her head, but she was not convinced. She said: "I sense something's wrong. Maybe, something is bothering him. He'll never tell us about it. We'll bring Saria Daan as his wife. Yes, that'll be the best. But will he happily accept her? Does he like her or not? Or does he prefer some other girl?"

Thenga's father dismissed her misgivings : "Why are you saying that? Do you have any doubts ?"

The old man felt agitated and shouted at his wife: "That's enough. Hari Jani's daughter is a fine girl. One would be lucky to have her for a wife. And how would Thenga not be attracted to her? How do we know his mind? Why should we disagree with him if he chooses someone else? We're simply doing whatever we think best for him. If he's interested in some other girl, he must say so. Why should he behave like a girl?"

Thenga's mother felt relieved. Her husband was a simple man who could impress others with his simple and straightforward ways.

On the appointed day Ram Muduli got up at cock-crow. He would go to ask the hand of Saria Daan for his son. He started preparing himself for the day. True, he was the village headman, but on occasions such as this he would have to touch the feet of his elders and seek their blessings. A messenger had been sent to the Palida village. It was far from Lulla, but some of his friends and relatives would come. Thenga's mother was busy washing and cleaning the house. Everyone in the house was busy doing something or the other. No one was sitting idle. Thenga had gone off to the forest with the cattle, so he was not to be seen.

Thenga's father told his mother: "Just see what your son is doing. There's so much work to be done and he's not to be seen anywhere. He's having a good time somewhere. God alone knows where he is."

His mother smiled and said teasingly: "True. He should have done every bit of work himself before marrying. But instead, he's put the whole burden on his parents' shoulders. Isn't that a great offence ?"

The two burst out laughing. However bold and fearless a son might be at other times, at such a time, reticence suited him best. If his proud head did not bend, the pain of childbirth and of raising him would not be justified.

In the scorching heat of midday Thenga Jani sat near a stream in the Marichimal forest. His cows strayed. His marriage would be settled today. He was supposed to be cheerful on an occasion like this, but why didn't he feel happy? The rays of the winter sun hit him hard. He felt drowsy.

Since morning Thenga had not talked to anyone. There was no peace even in solitude. He was angry with himself. He felt irritated and beat his cows with a stick. The poor creatures escaped through the space between the rocks and stared at Thenga from a distance. But his anger did not abate. He could not dream of going against parents' wishes. That meant he would have to accept their decision.

The day waned. Today was a very happy day for his parents. This was an occasion for the whole village to celebrate. People smiled at him.

Birds flew overhead. The cows grazed in the forest. Everything seemed to be moving forward. He alone was motionless. He lay on the ground, sick at heart. His parents were going to celebrate their only son's wedding engagement with the villagers over food and drink.

Time passed. Indifferent to his surroundings Thenga sat drowsily leaning against a mango tree. Someone with a shining hair-knot came into view, coming up the narrow path through the hills. He sat up and looked hard to catch sight of who it was. He saw Santosh Kumari and exclaimed in joy.

Santosh Kumari said to Thenga. "You're here, Thenga? Today they're going to ask for the hand of your bride and you're hiding here."

Santosh Kumari laughed. A dead dry laugh. Thenga's eyes

became moist and he hung his head. Lifting his face up, Kumari said: "Oh, you're crying. Your face looks pale. Hasn't your father given you food to eat?"

They both looked at each other. Both of them started sobbing. They fell into each other's arms.

Everything stood still. Only the sound of the grazing cows could be heard. Thenga and Santosh Kumari calmed down. The sun had grown mellow. On Thenga's lips were the salty tears of Santosh Kumari. Thenga with a firm voice said: "Let people gossip. I shall never leave you."

Santosh Kumari said nothing.

Thenga continued: "Our people will disown us. Let them. We'll go away and settle somewhere else. We'll go to a place where no one knows us, no one from this place can see us. Only you and I, in some remote part of a dense forest. We'll clear a small area and build a hut near a stream. Only the two of us will live there. Who do you think will harm us? Come, let's go now."

Santosh Kumari's words threw cold water on Thenga's fiery words: "Are you mad? Is there such a place on earth where we can hide and people won't find us? Yes, we can clear a part of the forest and build a hut. But how will we live? Where will we get money? We won't have land to work. What will we eat? What will we wear? It will be quite disgraceful, if we're found. No, no. This is madness."

Santosh Kumari sobbed. Thenga Jani collected himself and said: "Shedding tears will not do, dear. We have to do something. Yes, we'll leave the village. We'll go wherever possible."

Then, like a child, he asked her: "Which place will be best for us, you think?"

Santosh Kumari said: "There is one place—the tea estates in Assam. We can go and work there."

Thenga: "Shall we have to go to Assam, Kumari ? That far?"

Kumari: "Where else can we go?"

Thenga : "Will you leave your home and go to that far-off place with me?"

Kumari: "Why can't I? You may not, if you don't want to. But I will. Yes, we will go to Assam. We'll tell others we're a married couple belonging to the Paraja tribe. We'll see places and earn money. We'll stay there as long as we wish. We'll return with our savings and settle either in Koraput or in Jeypore. Then no one can harm us. Yes, that's the only way out."

Thenga: "All right. We'll go to Assam. But when?"

Kumari: "Before the night is over. We'll get up and leave the village in the dark. You'll come out from the *dhangda*-hall. I'll be waiting for you by the roadside."

Things now appeared bright to Thenga Jani. He said: "All right."

10

Ram Muduli, the headman of the village, returned home that evening after completing the ritual of asking for the hand of the bride for his son; he settled the matter with his son's would be in-laws over five pots of cooked wine and five bottles of stored wine. In front of the five *panchayat* members, Jani put it to Saria Daan, "My dear, the headman of this village has come to ask for your hand for his son, Thenga Jani. We are the Paraja people; our minds are nobody's slaves. If you wish, you can give your consent and if not, you can refuse now, and I'll immediately return all his gifts. Be frank. Thenga Jani belongs to this village. He's not unknown to you."

Her head lowered, Saria Daan trying her best to conceal her happiness, replied, "I've no one in mind. My parents' wishes are my wishes."

The five *panchayat* members sitting there murmured: "Oh, what a nice girl!" All of them embraced Saria Daan. Some cuddled her, stroked her head, patted her back and some hugged her. The headman embracing her said: "My little mother is pretty like a golden idol. I'll cherish you like a flower. My house, my door—everything is yours. Take care of us, old people. Serve us rice-water at times."

The headman returned home overjoyed. Today he needed to relax because this day he had achieved his highest goal in life. He had begotten a son and today he found a bride for that boy. He had sown the seed, now the tree had borne flowers.

But is the work ever really over? A Paraja's work never ends. He is immortal, like this earth. He is eternally free, and eternally youthful. On his way back Ram drank from the pot of wine. His friends also drank and soon they got intoxicated. He shouted all the way home. "All of you dance today, boys and girls. Gather here and light the fire. Blow the trumpet, beat the drums, dance, sing." A crowd gathered and the people grew excited; in the happiness of one lies the happiness of the whole clan. From the *dhangda-hall* came the sound of *dungdunga*. In the evening the girls hastily

gulped down the rice water since they had to get ready for the dance.

Thenga Jani returned with the herd of cows a little after dusk. His mother, eager to feed her son, had cooked some old ragi and bean curry. In the house cooked wine and bottled wine were plentiful. "Eat my son, eat. Don't be shy. Where were you the whole day in this heat? See how your stomach has shrunk due to hunger. You look so tired."

The dance began. Thenga Jani was lying in the *dhangda-hall* preparing himself mentally for the morning. Then he made a bundle of two or three pieces of cloth and kept it under his head, along with two rupees, a bit of ragi and his *dungdunga*.

Outside, there was dancing and merriment. But all this seemed like bondage: his father's love, his mother's tears. Everything here bound him like a fetter. This was his last night here and he was lying like a small bird under a large net. Tomorrow morning the net would be lifted, these fetters would fall away; tomorrow morning he would be free.

He couldn't get any sleep throughout the night. An overpowering passion kept him under its spell. He pictured Santosh Kumari's face in various forms. Every part of her body—her eyes, her hands, her legs—bewitched him. The different limbs combined to create the picture of the whole woman, her body in certain postures. Her smile, her waving hair, her gait—all came to him in a flash. And those images stretched from one end of the horizon to the other under the moon and spread like a luminous mist. Those images brought solace to Thenga Jani, made him feel free. His flesh-and-blood frame exploded into pieces. He became a vast brilliant galaxy, and every fragment of his being throbbed with ecstasy combining joy with sorrow, hope with fear. His entire being now extended through the dark towards a bonfire on a knoll. The bonfire reached the skies and wove a net of brilliant red flames. The name of this bonfire was Santosh Kumari.

Thenga Jani woke up very early, before cock-crow. He arranged his clothes, placed the *dungdunga* on his shoulder, and picking up his lathi he slowly walked out of the hall. Nobody was awake. The darkness was vanishing, and the dogs, vigilant throughout the night, had gone to sleep. The cows in the cowshed breathed heavily.

Thenga Jani came out. The houses stood in rows; sleep reigned over them. These houses, this village-path, this smoke and this mist, this dusty village where he had grown up—all these he knew intimately. Dew drops falling on his face occasionally reminded him that he was walking through his village.

The word 'village' meant many things to him. But as a sleep-walker he walked on, thinking of nothing.

Santosh Kumari, trembling, dressed as a Paraja girl, joined him midway. She walked carrying a bundle on her head, as if she was going to the village market.

They walked hastily, keeping close to each other. The feeling of being together braced them. No worries, no anxieties—now fearlessly they walked down the path. And in that thinning darkness all the groves, with which they were acquainted, receded: so did the river and the valley. One thought kept worrying them: how to cover the longest possible distance in the shortest possible time. A nameless fear oppressed them, as if somebody was shadowing them. Would they be recognized? Would they be caught?

In the misty semi-darkness of dawn they almost swam the distance and it gradually became light. Only a few stars shone feebly in the sky. The darkness came to an end, and so did the forest. The paddy fields and the river ran parallel to each other. By the time it was light, they both had gone a long way.

The rays of the morning sun spread. Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari were passing through a valley. They sweated profusely. They sat down for a few moments on a rock under the shade of a tree. Nobody was following them; the risk was over. But half of their enthusiasm to run away from home was gone.

"See Kumari, there is Dadi Budha on the top of that mound. You can see him even from this distance," said Thenga The mist had already lifted and a feeling of freshness pervaded the air. And Dadi Budha was visible in the dim light of dawn. Only then did they realize they had left their village for good. Below the mound of Dadi Budha their village lay like sloping blue streaks dawn at random. There lived their parents, friends and relatives. What was their fault? They had lavished their love on them, their affection, adoration. What was their fault? That had been their village since

the days of their ancestors; on the *veraman* lay in their memories, embodied in flat or pointed stones. The image of both his old parents swam before Thenga Jani's eyes. What would they be doing now? And the image of that girl, Saria Daan, danced before his eyes—the girl who had been chosen only yesterday to be his bride. He thought of that half-built house being constructed with loving care by a father for his son's happiness. The son was to stay in it after his marriage.

Santosh Kumari was sitting close to Thenga. A no-man's land lay all around them, where no one knew them, no one would offer them support. A strange life waited for them.

Thenga thought, he had left behind the ones on whom he could have depended. In their love he would have found comfort and assurance—right from his birth to his death.

The sun went higher up. In the distance the water of the Muran glittered. It was as if it rushed ahead, sweeping aside the memories of that forgotten village. Seated on the rock, Thenga Jani kept staring at Dadi Budha. Santosh Kumari sat by his side. For the time being he had completely forgotten her. The sweat of his forehead and the sweat behind his ears had already dried but tears kept pouring from his eyes. The sun almost blinded his tear-filled eyes. He became conscious only after Santosh Kumari called him: "Come on, wake up! How could you get tired so soon? Time will run out if we just sit like this. And if somebody comes over here searching for us, what then?" Her face looked grave—this was the time of the day when she would have fed her pet pig and fondly put it to sleep. She had to choose between her parents and Thenga Jani. But she was a woman, not a man. All at once she exclaimed "Oh! How beautiful those flowers are!" She ran towards them, plucked a few and stuck them in her hair. Taking Thenga Jani's hand into her own she pulled him up and said: "Get up. Getting tired won't do. We must reach Koraput today." Thenga Jani, taking a deep breath, rose to his feet. Now they had to walk down the hill, a slope; the sky of the village they had left behind would be on the other side of the hill.

They came and stood on the top of the hill: the straight figure of Thenga Jani, with his *dungdunga* and a small bundle in one hand; a stick in the other, and close to him Santosh Kumari, one

of her hands around Thenga's arm, her other hand holding a small bundle.

They prayed silently to Dadi Budha and, like aimless wanderers, walked down an unknown path lit by the morning sun.

11

The headman did not forget Dadi Budha on the evening of his son's engagement. Rice in a broken clay pot was placed before the deity. The earth was wet where wine had been poured. Flowers kept fresh by the dew lay scattered in front of him. The place was strewn with chicken feathers and down. The headman had offered his heartfelt thanks to Dadi Budha. He had prayed for the prosperity of all. He had prayed to the Almighty to shower honey on his people.

In the morning when the flies buzzed and a crow sat comfortably on his head, Dadi Budha seemed to be staring at all these like an innocent boy. He was the ancestral spirit that kept a vigil over the village. He was responsible for the prosperity and the misery of everyone. He was feared as well as respected by all. So many festivals were celebrated in his honour; trumpets were blown on the mound to proclaim his glory. People with tooth sticks in their mouth would pass by him every morning. They would go to the river with pots in their hands. The joys and sorrows of one individual were different from those of another. People, who had received his favours—one, whose son had recovered from a serious illness, another, whose missing cow had been found, a third, the fruits of whose tree had ripened, and yet another, whose tree bore fruit for the first time—expressed their gratitude by prostrating themselves before him.

Dadi Budha was the eternal ancestor. People said his praise, sang his glory. People in distress—those whose baby died at birth, those whose cows had been stolen, those whose harvest of the year had been washed away—came to the mound, pray to him and wait. They did not complain that their prayers were not heard. Maybe, problems would not come to an end in a single day—children would die and cows would be lost. Therefore they blamed their fate, not the god. Thus they placed their full confidence in Dadi Budha. They tried to offer him bribes so that their future would be safe. They were all human beings and they had to toil in the hope of a better tomorrow, although their tomorrows might

turn out to be no better than their yesterdays. Dadi Budha was a god; his demands for rites and offerings had to be be met without delay.

Hunka Budha spread himself out. People collected his dust, took it as a cure for headache and fever; some took it with the hope of getting a child. But he grew larger and made up for the loss.

12

Saria Daan got up early in the morning; she had been dreaming the whole night. She felt a strong desire to get a glimpse of Thenga Jani; she was confident they would meet by chance. Maybe when she walked down to the river, Thenga would be standing on the bank and look at her. She would not mind. Thenga belonged to her and she belonged to him. She had been asked if she had any objection to the marriage. How embarrassing!

But Saria Daan did not meet Thenga when she went down to the river. How was it possible after incident yesterday, she thought. Thenga was a man and he had every right to drink on an occasion like that. What was wrong if he had emptied even a barrel of wine to celebrate his engagement? Wasn't it true that more a person drank, the longer he slept?

Before midday Thenga's mother went along the village path loudly calling her son. Thenga's father too called him: "Thenga, Thenga." He asked the people he came across: "Has Thenga come here?"

Saria Daan sat with her hair hanging loose and rubbed it with castor oil. She felt embarrassed. "Do these people think I've kept their son hidden? Why else are they shouting 'Thenga' 'Thenga' as they walk down the path?", she said to herself. She was very amused. Could someone like Thenga remain hidden? Wherever he was—in the Nandigaan market, the Dumaguda market or even the large Dumuriput market—he would always stand out. Who could hide him?

This reminded Saria Daan of her dream last night; a sweet sensation ran through her. Then she felt angry with Thenga. How much time had passed since morning! What would he have lost if he had come by this way? What a man!

While Saria Daan was taking rice-water, she heard someone say harshly: "Yes, that Aleibiria from the Domb corner. Santosh Kumari isn't there? Not seen since morning? No, she never goes out like that. It's already time for the midday meal, it's time to take rice-water. Where has Kumari gone? God knows where she is. She's

a bit showy by nature, always runs after young men. She keeps on looking at a young man's face when she sees him, knowingly forgets to cover parts of her body in the presence of a young man. Oh, Domb people are like that. How shameless!"

Saria Daan's heart sank. She could not drink the rice-water. She went inside the house, opened her trunk and started rearranging her clothes. Then she took some water and tamarind in a bowl and started cleaning her brass jewellery. Her hands automatically slowed down while doing it. Doubts assailed her mind.

The whispers of the noontime grew into loud voices by the afternoon. Saria Daan could hear a few persons running here and there, sobbing and speaking at the same time. Nothing was clear from their conversation. The sounds came from the part of the village where Thenga Jani's house stood. The sound of wailing was also heard in the Domb quarter.

Saria Daan's heart quaked. Presently, Saria Phoola ran in and said to her; "Have you heard? Santosh Kumari, the Domb girl, has eloped with your groom, Thenga Jani. God knows where they've gone. Everyone's crying in their house. I'm going there. Will you come with me?"

"Eh!" Saria Daan grew pale. She half-closed the door and started sobbing.

Ram Muduli, the headman, sat on a log of wood staring open-mouthed at the half-built house. Only the walls had risen and even they were incomplete. A heap of clay lay in one corner of the unfinished house and half-torn bamboo pieces in another. *Phiri* grass was stored in heaps surrounded by a bamboo fence.

The house was a labour of love. One day it would have been completed; a house-blessing ceremony would have taken place. The floor and walls would have been decorated with strips of black, white and red clay. On its thatch would have spread gourd and pumpkin creepers; creepers of bitter gourd and *sima* would have been trained up the walls. The house would have Belonged to Thenga Jani and Saria Daan. Saria would have ground ragi and *suan* on its floor. The roof would have provided shelter to the chirping birds. Bumblebees would have built their nests in the corners of the doors to provide shelter for their small ones. Dogs and crows would have visited the front yard. A couple of naughty

children with dry hair, dirt on their bellies, saliva running down their mouth, water rolling down their noses—Saria and Thenga's children—would have moved in and out of the house. They would have grown up in this very house, causing worry to their parents. One of them might have taken the beads of his father's necklace, another might have pulled at his mother's saree. Untidy body, unwashed eyes and rather large ears—children of the hills.

Ram Muduli sat stunned. He kept staring at the house. His shadow grew smaller. His mouth remained half-open. Scratching her cheeks and hair and beating her chest and yelling, Thenga's mother ran out of the house a number of times. Ram at last came out of his stupor. He buried his head between his knees and wept like a child. The violence of his grief shook the log he was seated on. To a man from a little distance he resembled a stone-figure. His throat seemed to have dried; only his sobbing could be heard when one came close to him.

Seven days passed. But Ram Muduli continued in the same state of mind. He did not raise his head when the neighbours passed beside him. Children stared timidly at him. Village elders including Chancheri, the barber, came to console him. Chancheri said: *"Naik! Naik!* You have to bear your lot. How long will you brood over it? How many days will you spend without food or drink? Get up, eat something and give the villagers a small feast, or else you may lose your caste. Come, get up, brother."

Ram said nothing. Raising his head, he gave the person coming to console him such a pitiful look that he felt sorry for him. Hari Jani, unable to stand his friend's agony, went up to him and comforted him. Putting his hands around the headman he said: "Brother! Brother!" But Ram only buried his head deeper and sobbed. His tears made patches of the ground wet. Attempts to console him only tired and irritated him.

The news that Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari had fled to Koraput and from there to Assam reached Lulla village. Philiman Domb of Dashmantapur had gone to Koraput to sell some animal skins. He had seen them on his way back home. Those who had gone to search for them were also saying the same thing. They did what many others had done earlier. People had run away from the village to evade repayment of loans or to earn money—some of

them settled down in towns; some died; only a few returned.

Ram Muduli seemed to lose his mental balance; he behaved like a mad man. The villagers were stunned. It was true that his son had left the village. After his death no one from his family would become a headman. All his hopes had been dashed. But there was the village, the community. If the headman sat like this, who would look after the villagers? Who would collect the revenue? Who would settle the disputes? Who would look after the officers when they came to the village? Now people would be leaderless. The village would go to the dogs.

Days passed by. The villagers set about finding a quick solution to the headman's problems. Some evil *duma* had cast its ominous shadow on his house. For the good of the village, the *duma* had to be driven out. Eleo was a Christian, but he loved the headman. There was no one in the village who would not love such a nice man. The pastor and Eleo were not at all unhappy with Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari's elopement. They believed that one day both of them would return to the village. With the permission of the sahib, Thenga Jani could be accepted by the church. Soon he would be absorbed into the Christian community. And since Thenga's father was the headman, his son would inherit the title. The village would have its first Christian headman. At the Sunday service, in the presence of Reverend Solomon, Eleo conducted a prayer meeting for the headman. Eleo and others prayed to their father in Heaven, who, in order to relieve the burden of the world, took it all on Himself and allowed his son to be crucified. They prayed to God to bring relief to the headman and all said 'Amen' and sang hallelujah.

Eleo thought he had done his duty to the headman as his neighbour. He had done whatever was expected of a friend. But all this could not bring relief and comfort to Ram Muduli. His wife too continued to live in despair.

The villagers consulted the *dishari*, who leafed through the almanac. Breathing heavily through one nostril and then the other, the old man pondered over the leaves and drank a little wine. He scratched his head and gazed at the sky. Drawing lines on the ground he started mumbling something. At last he said that a special *puja* must be offered to Dadi Budha. The *gurumai* would

dance; *dhangdis* would also dance. The headman and his wife would take part in the *puja*. Only with the blessings of Dadi Budha could they regain their peace of mind. The evil *duma* which had made the headman's house its abode and caused so much misery to his family would then leave the house.

They all started preparations for the special *puja* to be held on the coming fullmoon night.

13

This vast world expands and contracts alternately in light and in darkness. At times on dark nights it contracts to a minuscule size. Covering itself with a dark blanket, it goes to sleep.

The half-moon shone like a memory half buried in the heart. Like a handful of puffed rice, stars were scattered across the blue sky. Some of these got stuck in the sky; others rolled away and disappeared. Amidst hope and despair, dreams and experiences, the lives of many people glittered like fireflies. It was hard to separate one from the other.

The headman had never taught himself to express his feelings in words. Who had learnt to do so ? He would sit speechless. At times he would wander aimlessly. Life for him was not merely a romantic tale; it was full of real experiences that gathered around an individual like dust gathering on the body. The headman felt that he was sinking. The flute of his soul played no more. Something shone and glittered and was finally enveloped by the encroaching darkness. Soon it would overwhelm everything.

Spring came. All on a sudden the headman realized that he had spent days doing nothing. A lot of work remained to be done. It was as if life had returned to his body. There was a flurry of activity. Nameless birds chirped in the forest. Rare flowers bloomed. The air was heavy with the smell of mango blossoms. Bees hummed. Honeycombs were everywhere, on the branches of trees, in the caves of the hills.

It was springtime. The Chaita festival would begin soon. People would be overwhelmed with joy; but what would it bring to the poor and the wretched ? The heat of the ascending sun would burn the grass. Flowers would wither. Fresh thorny mango blossoms would fall from the branches. Bees and butterflies never visited the flowers already shed. Moths and butterflies, born on this half-dead earth, flew to the enchanting world above; they never came down. In the hot sun half-burnt grass strewn with dead flowers stared at the sky above, where small birds flitted. The wings of these birds would be the colour of sparks of fire or of the autumnal sky.

Nature failed to revive the spirits of Ram Muduli; in the midst

of all these beautiful scenes and sounds he sat still. Spring only tormented him, as if he was half-burnt grass. He felt he had lost his way in a dense forest while following a known path for many days. He would never find his way again. He was lost.

Hari Jani, putting his hands on the headman's shoulders, said: *"Naik bhai ! Naik bhai !"*

The villagers called him. But what had they to say to him ? Who were they after all ? Why did they disturb him, irritate him? One of them would say: "Have you taken rice-water ? Why are you sitting there exposing yourself to the sun the whole day ? Why don't you come in ? Get inside, dear."

Who were they? Why were they causing him so much trouble ? His unkempt hair looked like wound wire. Rubbing his teeth, opening his eyes wide and biting his lips he stared at the unfinished house. Yes, he had a son, his only son. A few days ago he was there. He remembered him only faintly – no, he remembered him rather clearly. The boy called him 'Father' and he prayed to Dadi Budha for the boy's happiness and prosperity. The boy grew tall like a sal tree. He was a good chap. After that...He could not think any more. His son ran away. He left him. Did he die ? He felt as if his son's dead body had been kept hidden somewhere in that house. His son. His flesh and blood, his mind and his words. His own son. Alas !

Ram Muduli fixed his swollen eyes on his house. From some remote corner of his mind, somewhere deep within him, anguish would spring and spread, and he would burst into tears. Large drops would fall from his eyes. The saliva in his mouth often formed a cobweb; the tears he shed resembled dead mango blossoms.

Thenga's mother lay in a corner, exhausted. Where was her son ? Where had he gone ? Wouldn't he come to take rice-water from his mother ? He would no longer rest his head on her lap and say: "Ma, oh ma, give me sweets."

She wailed. How beautiful her voice was ! A fine melody ! Weren't all natural songs melodious ? Her wailing pierced the wind and reached distant places. It was out of tune with the music of springtime. But they all mingled – the sweet fragrant blossoms, the brilliant sunrise and the pitiful wailing.

14

The fullmoon day came. The headman slowly returned to normal life. Though he paid no attention to his land, he began taking a little rice-water. Things would gradually improve. Though Thenga's mother still shed tears, she had come out from the corner of the house and started cooking. She cried with a louder voice now; food had given her some strength. By the grace of Dadi Budha things would soon fall into place.

The *dishari* had given his instructions; they were not to be disobeyed. A *puja* must be offered to Dadi Budha. A Paraja boy had eloped with a Domb girl to far-off Assam. It was an inauspicious event. Seeing the grief of the headman, people had thought that he would go mad. Even now nothing could be taken for granted. The blessings of Dadi Budha must be sought. Even if it was not yet Chaita, the villagers would worship their eternal ancestor in the date-palm tree on the hillock.

The houses were painted. Young Paraja girls came to bathe in the Muran. Saria Phoola, as usual, called out: "Saria Daan."

Saria Daan's voice quivered: "Yes."

Thenga Jani had left the village; let him go. Many more Janis would come to ask for her hand. She had developed a dislike for Thenga, which had now reduced years of her love to ashes. She was the eternal woman, whose magnetic charm could attract many young men. Saria Phoola and Saria Daan became friends once more. Once Thenga Jani had stood between them. The waters of the Muran swept away memories of him.

The fullmoon night arrived. A big round moon rode the sky. Waves of happiness sprang from the peaks of the hills and spread over the whole area. With their hands around each others' waist, the girls stood encircling Dadi Budha; the boys moved around excitedly. They drank a lot of cooked wine. The *dishari* chanted *mantras;* the *gurumai* danced. When the *gurumai* was overpowered by the spirit of the deity he declared: "Thenga Jani was a bad *duma;* Santosh Kumari was a bad *duma*. Their elopement was preordained. I, Dadi Budha had known it all before anyone of you was born. You are all my children; your good and bad are in my

hands. Drink, dance and sing, give me wine, give me chickens. I assure you—no harm will come to you."

A wave of joy spread amongst the villagers. People drank wine. The *gurumai's* trance came to an end. The dance started amidst hubbub. Reverend Solomon and Eleo had no faith in these heathen practices. They drew themselves apart from the crowd and chatted: "People worship the devil in this manner. These people will soon debase themselves and go to hell. They will never see the face of an angel."

Eleo and Solomon did not believe in the *gurumai's* words uttered in trance; they also did not have faith in the deity. But they could not stay away from the wine. They kept on drinking till they were totally out of their senses. Eleo went and stretched out on the ground and encouraged the dancing *dhangdis:* Solomon was not in his senses; he too started dancing. He entered the ring of dancing *dhangdis* and danced clapping his hands, shaking his head.

A huge fire was lighted in front of Dadi Budha. Pigeons and chickens were sacrificed. Flowers were brought in. The red gleam of the burning fire illuminated Dadi Budha and one could see him from a distance. The air was filled with the drumbeats, the sound of the *dungdunga* and the screams and giggles of *dhangdas* and *dhangdis.*

The headman and his wife also came. Both of them sat quietly. A gentle, soothing breeze brought them to their senses.

The headman felt as if he had stumbled over something while walking along an untrodden path. His past floated before his eyes. Once he himself had also been a *dhangda.* He had danced on many festive occasions, he had also played the *dungdunga.* He had won his *dhangdi,* Thenga's mother, with great difficulty. And she was with him now. So many things had happened in the meantime; but he was still there, his *dhangdi* was also there. And the same moonlit night was there; Dadi Budha, the eternal ancestor, was there. The headman once had a son, Thenga. He grew to become a *dhangda,* played the *dungdunga,* danced with *dhangdis.* He picked his *dhangdi* and went his way. He was a male child and he made his choice. His luck !

The dusty but delightful dance gave Ram Muduli some solace, some comfort. The enchanting dance charmed his mind. Like a

patient who after recovering from a prolonged illness tries to gather strength, Ram tried to muster the courage to enable him to live the rest of his life.

After the rituals were over, the villagers danced all the way down to the *veraman*. The Paraja dance, once started, never ended quickly. It was, for them, a night-long ceremony. Today they would dance until they were thoroughly exhausted.

Ram Muduli remained sitting there on the moon-washed hillock; he did not like to leave the place. Streaks of light seemed to emerge out of the darkness of his heart. Today he was able to think, able to feel angry—he was angry with himself, with his son, Thenga, and with that bewitching girl, Santosh Kumari, who, like other Dombs, knew the art of seduction. He enjoyed the ecstatic moonlight and could forgive all. Everything was preordained. Whatever had to happen, happened. No one could change one's fate.

All others left Dadi Budha's mound. The place became absolutely quiet. From the village *veraman* came the sound of drums and the rapturous joy of the excited dancers echoing through the hills. The sound reached even the surrounding villages. The exaltation receded after some time. The old man looked around. Seeing none he hastily went up to Dadi Budha. Silencing all his thoughts he stood in front of the deity. This was the right moment for him, when he and his god stood face to face with no barrier separating them. Sitting at the feet of Dadi Budha he burst into tears. With a trembling voice he complained: "Is this what you had in mind? What's my fault? You stifled my confidence, destroyed everything. If you say that Thenga was a bad *duma*, why did you not send a good one? I raised him, but you separated him from me. You've taken away my fortune from me."

Ram yelled bitterly and fell at the feet of Dadi Budha, who, soaked in the blood of chickens and pigeons and drenched in wine, stood firm, speechless and still.

Ram came to consciousness when his wife came searching for him. She took him in her arms and helped him stand up. Both turned homewards. Summoning all her strength and mustering her courage the old woman tried to comfort her husband. She said : "Whatever has happened was all preordained. If you lose your peace of mind, how shall I live ? Come, let's go home."

15

The festive month of Chaita came and brought the hills to life. The days of sugarcane were followed by the days of gourd and cucumber. The month of Baisakh came, which was followed by Jyestha, the time for sowing seeds. People did not get any rest. In the murky sky patches of ash-coloured clouds formed and gradually turned thick and black. A gust of cold wind brought the first shower of rain accompanied by earth-shaking thunder. The headman remained busy in his fields; he also managed the affairs of the village. He could never sit idle. He and his wife returned to normal. No one remembered that Thenga Jani and Santosh Kumari had left the village. The lord was above and the earth lay below. It was as if everything remained the same; nothing changed. The Parajas said; "See, what a kind deity Dadi Budha is. When one calls him he replies. "No one ever imagined that the headman would overcome the shock. Who helped him get well ? Wasn't it our Dadi Budha ? It was by his grace that a boy was born to Sunduru Paraja seven years after his marriage. Milku Jani's buffalo recovered from its ailment. Luku Jani, who had gone behind bars for making illicit liquor, was released. These were only a few of his miracles. Only those who placed their confidence in him could experience them. Why should others know ? The Dombs did not place their faith in him. Let them not. Have they prospered ? Peter, Simon, Paul, Michael—all of them were arrested on the charge of killing a cow in Musalmunda village for its meat. Masik and Beniamani were making illicit liquor. They were caught, arrested, fined and sent to prison. Why? Because Dadi Budha was annoyed with them.

Even people from other villages, while walking along the hill-path with their umbrellas and baggage, would bow to Dadi Budha. People would say; "This heavy downpour and the encircling darkness are all Dadi Budha's work." When on dark and stormy nights, the sound of rain was fiercer than a tiger's roar in the deep valley, Dadi Budha stood unmoved, proclaiming his dictats through the thunder. He ordered the clouds to float in the sky and pour rain into Marichimal. He also commanded the rain to go to Kendapeda

region, pass Laresh valley and pour into Naragachha. On the other side of the valley sometimes there would be no clouds in the sky; at times the smoke from a funeral pyre would curl up. People would say; "Dadi Budha was smoking his *pinka.*" After all he was a Paraja. If he did not smoke a *pinka* how could he watch over his children on dark winter nights ? Sitting in the huts, which were warm like a jackal's hole, mothers point out Dadi Budha to their children. Babies would lisp: "There is Dadi Budha."

It was all his game. Who could outwit him ?

Towards the end of the rainy season the old *dishari* fell ill. He suffered from fever and chest pain. He was all alone, but he never asked anyone to look after him. His neighbours were kind to him. The *dishari* drank some cooked wine; took some herbs. With great difficulty he dragged himself out of the house to bow to Dadi Budha, who stood over the hillock looking at him with his bright sparkling eyes. The old man asked the village children to get him some dust from Hunka Budha and rub it on his neck and forehead. Illness had made him weak. The floor of his hut was wet. Through a hole in the roof, rain water had come in. The old *dishari* lay on the damp soil, on a torn sack in a bed of *phiri* grass. He covered his body with a torn shawl. He went on muttering things, and concentrated on Dadi Budha. He pressed his hand to the left side of his chest, where the pain was acute. He kept his mind focussed on his deity.

Dadi Budha stood on the hillock, covered in bright vermilion with dark blotches. He put on a turban, wore an enchanting smile as if he was very pleased with himself. He felt concerned about the joys and sorrows of the whole world; hence the wrinkles on his forehead. How beautiful! How merciful! How powerful! Hunka Budha stood by him.

The seventy-year old *dishari* tried to recollect all the beautiful shapes he had seen in his life; he felt as if all these radiated from Dadi Budha. He also felt as if Dadi Budha was standing beside his sick-bed saying: "You are my priest, aren't you ? You are so close to me. If I don't cure you, whom shall I cure then ?"

Gradually the *dishari's* condition deteriorated; he could not speak. He grew delirious; gurgling sounds issued from his throat The pain in his chest grew unbearable. Sometimes he called out

the name of his wife, Kamli, or his son, Jhalia, both of whom had died long since. The villagers, who came to see him, would say to each other: "He's going to die, for he's seeing the *dumas.*" One day he called out those names until he was dead tired. That night Chancheri, the barber, sat by his side. In the morning the *dishari* breathed his last. His face was twisted. It seemed as if he had bared his teeth to mock someone. His eyes stared into space.

The village was astir: the *dishari* had passed away. His body was carried to the cremation ground on the other side of Dadi Budha's hillock. The day was bright. An ardent worshipper of Dadi Budha, making faces at his god with staring eyes, had returned to earth.

The old man had a strong desire to live, and he had prayed to god for a long life.

Death is too filthy, too repulsive. How ugly, how deformed the beautiful body appears in a few minutes ! This is why people hate to utter the name of Death. Parajas believe in rebirth. They tell the newborn baby that he was so and so in his previous birth. And with his rebirth, he likes to plunge himself into the mud of happiness and sorrow and so pass his days. Then one day he falls. Although he does not like death, it never fails to come at its appointed time. It comes in many shapes: fever, chest pain, a tiger. These are familiar ones. But there are many more.

After the *dishari* passed away ten or twelve others died of chest pain. People were down with fever. A lot of *pujas* were offered to Dadi Budha. And probably for that, fever and chest pain could be checked. Otherwise who could tell, the whole village might have been wiped out. Now it was autumn and the sky was cloudless. The ground became dry. The villagers felt safe now. No mishaps befell those who offered *puja* to Dadi Budha. "Be kind to us, Dadi Budha; do not give us any more trouble."

16

Ram Muduli remained occupied with his work: ploughing the land, growing crops, working the fields. He was busy from dawn to dusk. His wife stayed at home to prepare the meals. She spent the rest of her time outside making fuel and manure from cowdung. She also worked in the fields.

They never uttered Thenga's name.

The half-built house stood like a thorn. They did not like to look at it, but they could not bring themselves to demolish it. They had learnt to live with it. Its walls had crumbled in the heavy rains; it was as if there never had been any.

Throughout the day they worked in the mud, stones and pebbles. They were utterly indifferent to everything: joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure. They were creatures of the earth; they had no complaints.

Ram Muduli did not get time to think. For him there was life everywhere—in the ripe corn in the fields, in the vegetables and fruits in the back gardens, in the castor trees on the hilltops, in the *kangula* plants on the hillside, in the *suan* fields below, in the ragi and paddy fields in the valley. Those were the friends of a farmer, the fruits of his labour; they were his sons and daughters. How much trouble one had to put up with for them! As the years passed they grew from childhood to youth. One would like to sit silently somewhere amidst them. Gazing at this beauty of creation a man could rid himself of his despair and desolation; a new light dawned on him. He was always new, ever young in his own creation. He, the son of Dadi Budha. The Paraja.

Ram Muduli could not think what would happen to the year's harvest. No Paraja thought about that. Does a poet ever think about the future of his poetry ? In a few cases the harvest was already mortgaged to the moneylenders, who would come to collect as soon as it was gathered in. Some farmers had taken loans, which they would repay after the harvest. And daily labourers, officers, officials in the law courts—there were so many to cope with. But it would not do if a farmer only sat silently staring at the

ripe corn. It was his poetry. He felt like bursting into song; he would sing.

Whenever Ram was reminded of his son he would breathe heavily. His wife would shed tears. They had set themselves to work in order to get rid of their agony. One chore led to many others. They had no leisure. Wine made from stale ragi and *mahula* wine cured them of all their pain. They did not have time to think.

17

This year a calamity overtook the village. The cattle were covered with blisters. Several of them died of diarrhoea. The chicken died of some unknown disease. They drooped and collapsed. God alone knew where the disease came from. People were left bewildered.

Rufa Jani, the new *dishari* of the village, was no less wiser than the old one; in fact, he was more sincere. He worked harder and drank less. But even his methods were to no avail. Nothing could bring this calamity to an end. The Paraja girls danced before Dadi Budha until the skin under their feet came off. Chickens and pigeons, which had survived were sacrificed to placate Dadi Budha. Wine was poured on his hillock; but in vain.

The Dombs of the Christian settlement initially made fun of the rituals of the Hindu Parajas. But when disease struck their animals, they called an assembly. Praying to the Almighty Father they repeatedly sang devotional hymns. They prayed to god for their cows and chicken.

But nothing came of their prayers.

Crows, vultures, wolves and dogs quarrelled over the flesh of the dead cattle. Cries of distress filled the air. On moonlit nights, when a red half-moon hung over the hill, people sat around a fire and said to each other: "My four bullocks are dead. How can I work the land this year?" "All my cattle are gone." Housewives entered the cowsheds, torches in hand, and looked all around. There were only posts, some bare, some with ropes tied to them. In a corner one or two cows lay silently. The cows were also members of the family. They were friends of man; with them they plodded bravely through mud and pebbles. And now they were dying. Those sad eyes were unable to tell of their pain and suffering in human language.

Rufa Jani's medicines did not work, but his prestige had not been affected by this failure. Before becoming the *dishari* he had taught himself the uses of medicinal herbs. Now as *dishari* he could also secure the blessings of god. He moved from one cowshed to another carrying a bag. At one place he burnt some incense sticks,

elsewhere he chanted some *mantras* and slapped the face of a sick cow, elsewhere he gave a cow an herb. The cows died all the same; but he had to go and attend to everyone.

People said: "If the old *dishari* were alive today this wouldn't have happened."

Rufa Jani worked hard. Whether he knew the cure or not was another thing.

One said: "Oh *dishari*, what kind of *puja* did you offer? My cattle didn't live; I lost all three."

Rufa Jani was surprised. How ungrateful the people were, he thought. Yes, that was the way of the world. He did his best to make others happy. Unmindful of his own comfort he had collected herbs from the forest, dry faeces of different animals and many other things. Mumbling something to himself and making different gestures he had prepared his nostrums in front of the villagers. In spite of all this they would say: "Rufa Jani won't be able to deal with this epidemic; we must find a new *dishari*, preferably a Kondh. There is Chikkanu Kondh, the younger brother of Bingu Saaon of Gadrajhola."

The villagers caused the headman a lot of worries. Chancheri said 'yes' to whatever was said, and thus added to Rufa's tension. The headman agreed with everybody. Rufa Jani remained watchful.

One morning Rufa Jani called a meeting; he asked all the villagers to assemble. His hair was loose and his eyes were red and heavy-lidded. He said: "Last night Dadi Budha appeared in my dreams; he looked terrifying. He told me the village had become a den of sinful activities. The son of the headman eloped with a Domb girl. But the headman did not bother to perform a rite of expiation; he did not give a feast. The god told me, 'I am Dadi Budha, I have authority over all of you. How can I brook disrespect shown to me ? Do something to placate me; or else I will destroy everything. Don't you forget this.'"

All the villagers, young and old, had gathered. The headman lowered his head and said: "I lost everything. The cows have gone; my son has gone. I've never shown disrespect to Dadi Budha. Why did he say that?"

Rufa Jani said: "I said whatever I saw in my dream. I received the command to speak and I spoke. I haven't said anything on my own."

Everyone, nodding their head, said: "True."

Ram Muduli gave a feast; he was accepted back into his clan.

It was bitterly cold. The cold chilled one's marrow. Nearly three quarters of the cows and chickens were dead. Then suddenly the killer disease was gone.

Rufa Jani, with his head held high, moved round the village and said: "You saw what happened ? Didn't I predict it ?" .

His stock among the villagers rose. Now there was no talk of replacing him with Chikkanu Kondh from Gadrajhola. Looking at the piles of the rain-washed bones of the cattle glittering in the sunlight, people heaved a deep sigh and said: "Why didn't you say this earlier, Rufa Jani?"

Rufa observed: "The intentions of clouds, tigers, officers and gods are always beyond us. How can I know what's in their mind?"

But in the long run Rufa Jani failed to protect the village. Soon after the danger to the cattle was over, he fixed a day for the marriage of a few girls from the village, because, he said, there was no auspicious day next year. Saria Daan got married, Saria Phoola, Boti, Moti, Rangia, Jhapi—all of them got married. A few days passed joyfully in feasting and dancing. But one day, towards the end of the month of Margashira, the woodcutters from the nearby forest came back and reported they had noticed the pugmarks of a tiger. Five days later, the tiger carried off Jiro Paraja. People panicked. Rufa Jani performed *pujas*. It was believed that Jiro Paraja's ghost would become a tiger-*duma* and help the tiger carry off other villagers. Three days later in Chendiguda, two miles from Lulla, the tiger carried off Komana Saonta. That very day Rufa Jani went around bragging: "See how I pushed the tiger from this forest to the forest of Chendiguda." But that afternoon the tiger attacked and killed Nadu Paraja of Lulla.

The following few days were foggy. People knew they were going through a terrible time, but that did not mean they would sit idle at home. They would have to go to the market and to the fields. They now moved about in groups, always alert. But even that did not prove to be totally safe. The tiger attacked like a mad dog and dragged one out of a group of fifteen or twenty. One day the tiger crawled stealthily to the bank of the Muran and lay silently while some women were taking their bath. They had left their

clothes on the bank and were bathing naked. When they saw the tiger, fear overcame shame and they screamed. The tiger fled when forty to fifty persons came running from the village carrying spears.

Sometimes in the dark the greenish red eyes of the tiger glittered like two stars. Rufa Jani distributed some talismans among the villagers, which they tied around their arms, necks or waists. But still they could not escape the tiger. Within a month twenty persons fell prey to the man-eater.

The village decayed. Never in the past had it experienced such a catastrophe. Other villages in the valley were often haunted by tigers, but this village had always been lucky.

Fear gripped the village. What would happen? The headman worried about the payment of revenue. One morning an officer might come and ask for it. The thought tormented the small farmer. It was a hill region and one had to go to the forest even for a piece of firewood; to go from one village to another one had to pass through the forest. The forest was close to the fields. The tiger could be hiding; suddenly it might leap out and carry someone off.

Early one morning; old Jamadar Jani had gone to the outskirts of the village to answer the call of nature. A field of chest-high *phiri* grass stretched all the way down to the river. Suddenly the tiger pounced on him and took him off. The villagers were terror-struck.

In spite of all this, people had to come out and get about. Or else the ripe paddy in the fields would rot. What would they eat? How would they get seeds for the next year ? If this year produce could not be harvested, people would die of starvation.

To scare the tiger away people formed large groups and carried lathis and knives when they went to the fields. They would guard the field of one villager one day, the next day they would guard another's. After the day's work was done they locked themselves in their homes and did not venture out. Seven days passed in this way, people felt safe. Instead of thirty or forty coming together groups of five to ten started moving about.

The tiger struck again. It seemed as if it was the messenger of death. After witnessing the havoc caused by the man-eater no one questioned the authority of Dadi Budha. People said only the

unlucky became the tiger's victims. Dadi Budha alone knew whether one's luck would hold. Today, for some unknown reason, Dadi Budha was angry with the people of Lulla. A devastating storm was blowing through the village. No one knew when it would subside.

No one was at peace; bad days had come. People said someone might have annoyed Dadi Budha. They all tried to point out each others' faults and quarrelled. People had at first blamed the headman and Aleibirio. The headman reminded them of the feast, the feast of penitence. People kept a close watch on each other just to find fault. Confined to their homes, they became irritable. Tension increased. One night the tiger entered the village and snatched Budra Paraja from his hut. His wife yelled and people came running. Budra never returned. People trembled in fear. Until then the tiger had attacked those who guarded the crops in lonely sheds by their fields, but this time it had carried off someone right from the village itself. How shocking !

So many villages in this land of hills had perished before. The same terrible fate now overtook Lulla. People starved; no food was cooked in their homes. The few cattle which had survived, were hide-bound. From almost every house came the fearful sound of lamentation. No one had time to console his neighbour. People just waited for things to happen. When they came out of the house they were frightened at the sight of even a calf, not to mention a jackal. And to them, in the dark even tree stumps appeared like tigers. They said to each other: "The tiger comes and waits for its prey on the hillock beyond Dadi Budha."

The night Budra Paraja was carried off by the tiger Shyam *gurumai* felt some new message was forcing its way through him. He was the village *kalisi*. Only through him would the village deity convey his message. Shyam was timid by nature. It seemed to him as if some god wanted to speak through him. During the daytime the feeling was not so strong; but after sunset it grew intense.

That very night the man-eater prowled about the village and roared. The roofs shook. Fear made people hold each other tightly. Children began crying but stopped suddenly. Shyam *gurumai* felt he had lost his self; it was as if the deity had stolen it. Each time the tiger roared he felt as if the voice of the god wanted to find release through him. All night long he could not sleep a wink. Early

in the morning he went to Rufa Jani, and told him his feeling. The new *dishari* did not have the guts to defy the old *gurumai*. He immediately went up to the headman and then to the trumpeteer. Drums were beaten and trumpets were blown. People came out, their faces still unwashed and gathered on the *veraman*, where lay the pointed and flat stones embodying the memories of their forefathers.

Shyam *gurumai* danced in a trance. The *dishari* chanted *mantras*. Wine and the blood of the sacrificed chickens were poured on the ground. The *gurumai* danced wildly. A strong light shone in his eyes; an expression of extraordinary cruelty lit up his face. He danced, rolled on the ground, chased someone and danced again sometimes he beat the drummers. People watched him awestruck. They whispered to one another: "What an ominous sign at the beginning of the day !"

All of a sudden the *gurumai* burst into wild laughter. Eyes bulging, his tongue hanging out of his mouth, he screamed: "I'll eat, I'll eat. I have counted. I have eaten two score and three."

People huddled together in fear. They held their breath.

The *gurumai* continued: "I am Dadi Budha; the greatest of all gods. I am the creator and the destroyer. Whenever something happens, it happens according to my wishes. If I want to kill someone, I kill him. Do not ask me why I do this, why I do that. Do not question me. I alone know my reasons. Do not ask me. I won't tell you. This place is infested with tiger *dumas*. Leave this village, or else you will be in danger. I am your creator. In your happiness lies my own. That is why I am warning you. Go my children, quit this village. My friendly deities will move in here. This will be the home of *dumas*. There is enough land at the foot of the Gadi Pabli hill. Build your houses there. The sooner you leave this village, the better. You will prosper over there. Wherever you go, I shall be with you. I shall always stand by your side, in your joys and sorrows. But leave this place and go."

The villagers threw themselves on the ground, and saluting the deity, said: "As you please; Dadi Budha. You can save us; you can kill us. We shall never defy you, never disobey you. We will leave this place as you wish. We are at your mercy, lord."

Shyam *gurumai* fell down unconscious; the spirit of the deity had left its medium.

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The village was full of bustle: everyone was leaving. People were leaving behind the village *veraman* with its pointed and flat stones.

Gadi Pabli hill was not far; it was concealed from view by Pachedi hill and Chilibeda forest. Was there enough room to set up a new village there? Was there land to till? Dadi Budha's command could not be ignored; they had to go there and settle there.

After the winter the forest would be dry and the tiger no longer a menace. There might be no problem in tilling the land of the village they were leaving behind, but no one had the guts to defy Dadi Budha. Whatever he had said, had to be followed unquestioningly. Go they must.

Eleo called on the headman and said: "Are you mad, dear? Who is Dadi Budha? Where will you go leaving behind your ancestral home? So much care has gone into creating these houses, fields and gardens. What will you get there? Why should you go there?"

Taking a deep breath the headman stared at the village.

Eleo continued: "I am an old man: listen to me. The tiger will leave this forest in summer. Why should we go through hardships elsewhere? If we have to die, who can save us? Stop this madness."

The headman faced a dilemma. On one side stood the village and on the other, Dadi Budha, presiding over the village. The headman shook his head. He said: "Two score and three persons have already fallen victims to the tiger. Our cattle have perished. Why should we live here any longer? You don't have to obey Dadi Budha, but he's our god. We've received his command. Now it's up to you whether you'll be with us, or act according to your religion."

Eleo tried his best to dissuade the headman from leaving the village. But Ram remained unmoved. He said: "Why should we live in this village?" He felt as if this was a complaint issuing from the depths of his heart. He had lost the game long ago. Dadi Budha's command was only a pretext. His Thenga Jani had left; his prop had been knocked off. All places were the same to him now. This village was no longer special in any way.

Eleo went to the Domb settlement, called the people together and tried his best to make them see reason. He said: "These Parajas are cowards. They're obstinate. Once they make up their mind, they won't listen to reason. Since they're leaving this village, they'll sell their land cheap. We'll stay here. Let them go."

There were only ten or twelve Domb families. No one listened to Eleo. They said: "Why should we live in this forest? We don't dare go out of our houses for fear of the tiger. Our lives will always be in danger."

The Dombs had witnessed the *gurumai* dance in the morning. They had heard his words. Faith in Dadi Budha had sent its roots deep into the hearts of even these Christians. Eleo could not convince them.

The *dishari* went to the new place on an auspicious day and laid the foundation of the new village. The headman and other elderly members of the village went and marked the place.

A large valley lay between Gadi Pabli hill and Pachedi hill. It was covered with dense forest; but in time it would be converted to paddy and ragi fields. Below the slopes of Gadi Pabli a new village would be created. Several sluggish streams emptied into river Muran; people could raise an embankment and grow paddy. This summer all the trees would be cut down and burnt; a patch of forest would be cleared. Crops of ragi, *suan, kangula* and castor would be raised. Dadi Budha had asured them the land would be fertile. They would lead a better life here.

Dadi Budha had not forbidden them to work the land of Lulla village. The lands of both the villages could be tilled by them as long as they could manage. Sites were earmarked: the Paraja settlement, the Domb settlement, roads, etc. A *puja* was performed; everything was sanctified. First small palm-leaf huts would be set up; houses could be built later. There would be difficulties at first; then things would fall into place.

People started shifting to the new place. All their belongings—pieces of wood, bamboo, knobs, doors, doorframes—were carried from Lulla village to the site of the new one. The deserted huts, the ashes of broken hearths, the pointed and the flat stones were

left behind. Within five days, the old village had disappeared; a new village had come into being elsewhere.

Lolla village was deserted. Wreaths of smoke would no longer rise from the thatches; garbage would no longer pile up; children would not make these houses untidy; herds of cows or groups of men would not be seen coming down the hill to this village. There would be no dancing on moonlit nights.

Dadi Budha in the date-palm trunk on the hillock was now only a corpse. His eternal soul would take some other form in some other village. He would make the *dhangdis* there dance. He would lavish many children on them. There he would create beautiful illusions.

Gradually the roofs collapsed; termites attacked the walls and reduced them to heaps of earth. The forest crept back. No one could now tell which was the *dhangda*-hall and which was the *dhangdi*-hall. Once young men and women kept awake all night and poured out their love here through their songs and the sound of the *dungdunga*.

Thenga Jani and Saria Daan might have married and set up a home. Where was that half-built house in which they might have lived?

On the hillock Hunka Budha grew and covered Dadi Budha. The two became one.

GLOSSARY

alasi	a variety of crop
amin	subordinate land surveyor
anchal	fringe of a saree
Baisakh	name of the first month in the Hindu calendar (April-May)
bhai	brother
Bhalia	name of a fruit
Chaita	name of the last month in the Hindu calendar (March-April)
Dadi Budha	a date-palm tree representing the ancestral spirit
dhangda	unmarried tribal young man
dhangda-hall	hall for the unmarried tribal young men to spend the night
dhangdi	unmarried tribal young woman
dhangdi-hall	hall for the unmarried tribal young women to spend the night
dishari	stargazer-astrologer-priest
Domb	name of a tribe
duma	sprit of a dead person
dungdunga	a musical intstrument
Gadaba	name of a tribe
girli	name of a flower
gopis	women of Gopa, who loved Krishna
goti	bonded labour
jhari	a tree
Jyestha	a month in the Hindu calendar (May-June)
kainsari	a kind of fish
kangula	a variety of crop
kalisi	one who gets possessed by a deity from time to time
Kartik	a month in the Hindu calendar (October-November)
Kondh	name of a tribe
kosa	*kosa* or coss, a measure of distance, approximately two miles

kurai	name of a flower
Magha	a month in the Hindu calender (January-February)
mahula	a kind of fruit/flower
mantra	hymn
Margashira	a month in the Hindu calendar (November-December)
muruja	coloured powder
naik	headman
panchayat	elderly members of a clan taking important decisions and settling disputes
Paraja	name of a tribe
Phaguna	a month in the Hindu calender (February-March)
pinka	a rool of tobacco
phiri	a kind of grass
pothi	palm-leaf manuscript
puja	prayer and offering
sima	a kind of vegetable
suan	a variety of crop
udulia	a kind of tribal marriage
veraman	central gathering place of the villagers
viman	a conical wooden structure for carrying a Hindu deity